

# **THINGS CZECH**

## **1997-2006**



**GK/AGENCE 'X'**

**2011**

# CONTENTS

1/ Wild & Wilder (1997)	3
A brief travelogue with comments on Kew Gardens, London, and Mies van der Rohe's Villa Tugendhat (1930).	
2/ Angel City (1999)	4
A short report on Jean Nouvel's Golden Angel office tower in Smíchov, Prague.	
3/ Read & Weep: Scandal in Bohemia (1999)	5
Essay on post-communist machinations within the architectural scene in the Czech Republic, including reports on: Jean Nouvel's Angel City and its critics; charges of "lite (postmodern) neo-functionalism" here and there; a cooked "open" competition for a proposed Kupka museum in an old mill on the island of Kampa (in the Vltava); a tourist-dodging transit through Josip Plečnik's gardens at Prague Castle; and stories and legends regarding the Star Pavilion and oak wood at White Mountain.	
4/ The Body of the City (2001)	9
Critique of Richard Meier and Partners' proposed ECM Radio Plaza, a series of towers meant to complete an unfinished, communist-era "Rockefeller Center" in the Pankrác district of Prague.	
5/ Gnostic Works: The Sculptural Works of Kurt Gebauer (2002)	11
Essay on the sculpture of Czech artist Kurt Gebauer with images from his exhibition in Zlín in 2001.	
6/ House of the Wind: May Day (2004)	14
Prose poem written on May Day 2004 regarding wandering around Olšanské hřbitovy, a mostly 19th-century cemetery in the Žižkov district of Prague.	
7/ Architectural Eyewash (2004)	15
An essay surveying: various complaints within the Czech architectural community regarding an outbreak of "architectural eyewash" in the 2004 Chamber of Architects' Grand Prix competition; rumors and innuendo regarding a proposed Kupka museum on Kampa; complaints about Daniel Libeskind's proposed Dalí House; etc.	
8/ Moravian Shadows (2004)	17
Essay on "cultural shadows" in the context of Czech architecture, with a nod to Nietzsches' <i>The Birth of Tragedy</i> .	
9/ The Near & The Far: Moravian Garden (2006)	24
Notes and discourses on a very small, yet "immense" South Moravian country garden in Skryje, Czech Republic.	

# WILD & WILDER

My first impression of Villa Tugendhat (1930), Mies van der Rohe's masterpiece in Brno, Czech Republic, is colored by a curious anomaly in the recently restored structure – a crack in the exterior wall of the villa inhabited by honeybees. This otherwise classic, rational modernist monument is already re-colonized by wild nature; albeit, a small inroad.

Tugendhat is powerful, a suburban nest for newlyweds, compact and virtuous in all things modern, full of curious gestures to grandiosity – full-storey doors, monumental glass enclosures on three sides implying a relationship to the infinite beyond the structure of the villa. Rich veneers of stone and wood remind one of the Barcelona Pavilion (1929). The rationalist use of a grid of supporting columns (space- and wall-generating units) frees the interior of the need for *actual* load-bearing walls. Each vestige of wall, then, performs a different task – blocking a view here, rounding a space there ...

All in all, Tugendhat is a moment of architectural history frozen in time. Architecture may be “frozen music”, but it is also “frozen time”. The bees, then, are harbingers of a type of “Spring” – after “Winter”. A small crack in the ice offers a space for the irruption of the Other into the emptiness of the Frozen Moment.

At Kew Gardens (a very large, expansive unit near London and part of the “Royal Botanic Garden franchise”), the breadth of the park-like grounds is structured, here and there, by architectural elements both formal and informal. The conservatories and the adjacent alpine and taxonomic gardens, the new Japanese garden notwithstanding (as it still seems just “out of the box” after three years), lend to the open park an episodic narrative of alternating, sometimes competing experiences. The greater part of Kew is its broad, tree-strewn grassland and glades, partly now gone to seed as the curators pay homage to the wildflowers that are “colonizing” the meadows and glades. In Aristotle's *Poetics*, episodic effects in literature and art are described as lacking value if not linked by a larger, all-encompassing theme or concept. At Kew this concept is Nature and its volition – that is, to overwhelm and define everything in its path. The dialectic is developed in its inevitable collision with Culture. Horticulture is just a favoring of Nature in a scientific context – the mission of Kew. The great drama of Kew is its subtle battle with Nature through Horticulture, perhaps to make Nature dance to a more civil tune.

But it is Sir William Chambers' Ruined Arch (c. 1760) at the edge of the park that commands the eye, the subtle eye, in the sense that all of Kew is secretly striving to mimic the mock indifference of the Arch. This folly, constructed to appear antique, and much further ruined since, stands aloof from Kew proper, an architecturally benign shrug to the ongoing grooming of the park. It rivals the crack at Tugendhat for poetic and dissonant effect. Both are openings to the ineffable: wild bees, wild nature, and wild imagination. The episodic is transcended by the irrepressible success of Nature and Time.

GK (May 1997)

## POSTSCRIPT



The bees build in the crevices  
Of loosening masonry, and there  
The mother birds bring grubs and flies.  
My wall is loosening; honey bees,  
Come live in the empty house of the stare.  
–William Butler Yeats (1923)



# ANGEL CITY



Jean Nouvel's Golden Angel office tower in Prague is scheduled to open in November 2000, but it has already weathered official and unofficial criticism for more than ten years. The building is a prelude to Nouvel's more ambitious Angel City plan, which when completed will encompass 60,000 square meters of office space, 9,000 square meters of retail and 10,000 square meters of apartments and recreational space.

Criticism of Golden Angel, primarily from local architects, has focused on its scale, materials, and imagery. Golden Angel, actually four linked buildings, will feature a white-and-grey concrete frame visible beneath the 32.5-meter glass outer wall of the main facade. The building varies from five to seven storeys and is linked by covered walkways and passages. Nouvel has incorporated the image of a guardian angel on the facade of the tower, which faces the Vltava River and the 10th-century ruins of Vyšehrad on the opposite bank. The proposed "angel," controversially, is a still of Bruno Ganz, the actor-angel from Wim Wenders' 1987 film *Wings of Desire*. The

wrap-around glass facade will also feature images of clouds drifting across the glass curtain wall and snippets of Czech poetry on the subject of angels.

**Image (above, left) – Jean Nouvel's Golden Angel (Angel City)**

(For the full-bore scandal surrounding the planning origins of this project, plus the awe-inspiring machinations of the current Czech architectural scene, see the sister essay "Read & Weep: Scandal in Bohemia".)

Golden Angel is sited on a main thoroughfare in Smíchov – an aging 500-acre industrial sector of the city – and sits above the Anděl (Angel) subway station that serves upwards of 20,000 passengers a day. The structure will include 13,000 square meters of office space and 7,000 square meters of retail. Scheduled retail components include a department store, a Dutch supermarket franchise, numerous small shops plus a 224-space parking garage.

Funded by the Dutch-Swiss financial services consortium ING, the same firm that brought Prague the controversial Frank Gehry-Vlado Milunić "Dancing Building" (a.k.a. "The Fred and Ginger Building"), Golden Angel is expected to cost \$27 to \$28 million. It will be the first step toward transforming Smíchov into an alternative city center, less for the millions of tourists that descend on Prague each year than for besieged locals.

Nouvel's 1985 planning study for Smíchov is representative of the architect's theory of "spot intervention", or strategic insertions meant to release latent urban energy ("urban acupuncture"). Nouvel's Angel City, immediately behind Golden Angel, will include a multiplex cinema, restaurants, small shops, a bowling alley and apartments. A third non-Nouvel component, New Smíchov, yet to be fully funded, is also planned. Construction is ready to start, given the immense hole in the ground at the site of a former Tatra car parts factory.

GK (Summer 1999)

## UPDATES & OUTTAKES

As of June 2001 the first section of Angel City is complete, including Golden Angel, and the second portion is fast approaching closure. The Angel building is extraordinary and may be seen from long views along Karmelitská Street approaching Smíchov from Malá Strana. The angel, after all the fuss, is, in fact, Bruno Ganz and he is pensively gazing down at the busy intersection of the working-class neighborhood. The shops in the ground-floor sections of the complex are filled with upper-echelon consumer goods and may help slake the profound desire for immediate gratification felt by the post-communist populace.

A book recounting the evolution of the project was published by the architecture journal *Zlatý Rez (Golden Section)*. See Irena Fialová, ed., *Zlatý Anděl: Jean Nouvel v Praze* (Prague: Zlatý Rez, 2000).

# READ & WEEP: SCANDAL IN BOHEMIA



## CZECH ANGELS

A very clever French architect, Jean Nouvel, has proposed a new complex of buildings in working-class Smíchov (Prague, Czech Republic) for the Dutch-Swiss bank ING. The overall project – Angel City – is huge. The central feature is a commercial “city within a city” (a department store, a supermarket, restaurants, small shops, office suites, bowling alley, apartments, multiplex cinema). A stand-alone project – Golden Angel – with the image of an “angel” serigraphed onto the eight-story glass facade is the keynote building in the commercial revitalization of this down-at-the-heels district. It is situated over the Anděl subway station (“Moscow” Station in the recent film *Kolya*). The Angel motif is inspired by both the historic place name for the area – Anděl – and German Wim Wenders’ 1987 film *Wings of Desire*; a film set in Berlin. Local architects and critics say “Okay, but the angel must be Czech”, German actor Bruno Ganz with ponytail and trench coat (or American Peter Falk!) notwithstanding. On the left bank of the Vltava, the ING plan was to include a glass office tower on the river’s edge but this has been delayed. The local critics say “Yes, but it cannot be as tall as monuments at Vyšehrad”, the 10th-century ruined castle precinct and necropolis immediately opposite on the right bank. The project architects point out that there are already water towers on buildings in the area that are as tall as any of Vyšehrad’s architectural remains. The Czech architect-critics say “Yes, but you will have offices in your tower, placing people higher than the sacred ruins”. The local architects working for Architectures Jean Nouvel point out that many of the former water towers actually now have small offices or apartments in them. The Czech critics are not impressed. They suggest the tower be masonry, not glass. Oddly, no one has asked the obvious question: “What do the Czech angels think?” This critical dance might then appropriate the all-purpose, unassailable excuse for *not* doing something – “The dead would not like it”.

Image (above, left) – Dragon-Wrestling Putto (Vrtba Garden, Prague)

## LITE NEO-FUNCTIONALISM

Czech “lite neo-functionalism” or “diet neo-functionalism”, not unlike Diet Coke, is nowhere near the Real Thing. It tastes vaguely like “classic functionalism” but has a somewhat flat or synthetic aftertaste. A Brno, Masaryk University professor has been making the rounds recently speaking out against this “reactionary” pseudo avant-garde affectation. Apparently, contemporary Czech architects mimic Czech functionalism of the 1920s and 1930s to “borrow” rigor and avoid post-historical pastiche, which is universally loathed by all Czech neo-modernist architects. Ironically, the Czech lite neo-functionalist aesthetic is exactly what it seeks to avoid – a post-modern version of functionalism. Canadian-born American architect Frank Gehry’s “Dancing Building” – a.k.a. “The Fred and Ginger Building” or “The Nederlander Building” – in Prague, designed with Vlado Milunić, ex-pat Yugoslav architect and friend of Czech President Václav Havel, is categorically dissed in the neo-functionalist architectural sub-culture. Milunić, for his part in this critical *danse macabre*, is finishing up a new housing complex – Areál Hvězda – in Petřiny, an upscale residential neighborhood in Prague 6 amid significant green reserves. Czech critics say the project resembles a “Chinese village”. Working with a street plan that twists and turns and with a color and formal palette that offends the neo-modernist and traditionalist architects alike, Milunić has intentionally created a controversial alternative vision for residential, non-commercial, non-historical Prague. Whether or not this will become simply another swathe of pricey housing for Prague’s *nouveaux riches* remains to be seen. Some of the most bizarre new housing in Prague, however, now can be found in Průhonice, a park-like suburb of the city dubbed “Beverly Hills” by disgruntled commoners.



Lite neo-functionalism, however, remains the “style du jour” applied to most new commercial projects as well as a wide range of private homes and public buildings in the post-communist Czech consumer culture. Antecedent to the International Style, Czech functionalism was appropriated by Philip Johnson and Henry Russell Hitchcock in the seminal *The International Style* (1932), a mostly mid-century book (in terms of impact) that established (“stripped, cubic, and [nominally] white”) modern architecture as the de facto corporate style in America and around the world. The current Czech style wars, far from invoking the universal principles of the International Style, seem instead irrevocably beached on the sands of professional envy and anxiety.

Emil Přikryl’s new Galerie Benedikta Rejta in Louny is named for the renowned German-born Gothic architect Benedikt Rejt, the architect responsible for the earliest portions of St. Vitus cathedral at Prague Castle – a “Medieval” cathedral, not finished until 1929. Přikryl’s gallery interior evokes awe and quiescence with sensuously polished concrete surfaces and a juxtaposition of primary forms that flatten in the half-lit interior into apparent abstract two-dimensional compositions. The building was – long ago – a brewery. It has been remodeled with such a spare aesthetic that one can surreally imagine the now invisible ancient vats slowly dissolving into a non-corporeal parallel world – foaming barley, yeast, and Bohemian hops overflowing to produce the verdant rolling hills and murky mysterious rivers and streams of Western Bohemia. There are details in Přikryl’s gallery vaguely reminiscent of the work of Italian architect Carlo Scarpa – e.g., where new floors almost meet the lower, original floor – but without the signature de luxe materials of Scarpa projects. Budget constraints kept this project heartbreakingly modest. And there are manipulations of light and shadow reminiscent of Japanese architect Tadao Ando’s work. These qualities underwrite the liminal, “utopian” atmospherics of a building that could be anywhere or nowhere. Přikryl was – notably – part of SIAL, a communist-era architectural think tank at Liberec that was allowed to explore experimental forms of architecture but rarely allowed to build anything.

Czech critics are thus far mostly mute about Galerie Benedikta Rejta, an appropriate silence though it is also a subtle form of censure in the sub-rosa culture of Czech architectural criticism. This sub-rosa culture operates in the pubs and academies and should perhaps be called instead “the *sub-prunus* complex”, after the famously potent *slivovice*, a high-octane “tonic” distilled from plums. (Přikryl’s project was first broached in a discussion with the editor of the Prague journal *Architekt* regarding 16th-century Mannerism in the Czech Lands. But the journal publishes mostly neo-functionalist building projects, reflecting its role as the beacon of architectural good taste, and its annual Grand Prix Award typically goes to a neo-functionalist architect.)

In a later conversation with Přikryl, the label “Mannerist” was heartily embraced by the architect as a badge of honor – or courage. He was aware of the esoteric theories of Max Dvořák, little known Czech-Austrian art historian of the c.1900 Vienna School, regarding the synchronic or structural significance of Mannerism. Notably, Dvořák also promoted a theory of national styles as opposed to the purely structural theories of Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin. Přikryl recounted in exacting detail a recent trip he took with his students at the Academy of Fine Arts (Prague) dubbed the “cult tour”. They visited Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier’s pilgrimage chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut at Ronchamp, French architect Nicholas Ledoux’s Saltworks at Chaux, Silesian-Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner’s Goetheanum at Dornach and Swiss architect Peter Zumthor’s Thermal Baths at Vals. The spirit of Mannerism indirectly animates all of these projects. Mannerism defies diachronic historicism. The words of British political philosopher Terry Eagleton on German philosopher Walter Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* (tragedy) come to mind: “Historicism ... is thus the final triumphant tyranny of the concept, the relentless sublation of discrete particulars to a system radically closed in its very dreary infinity. What will blast such closure to bits then, is the constellation *jetztzeit* [present-times], in which a particular present reaches out a redemptive hand to a particular piece of the past about to go under.” These words, juxtaposed to those of Vlado Milunić, in a recent interview in *Architekt* 3/99, suggest the current anxiety in Czech architecture circles is in fact a sign of a secret resurgent “Mannerist” phase underway: “When I do my work I stand my ground. If everyone worked like Kotik or A.D.N.S. it would be sad. But I am tolerant of other views. I do not judge them. It is nice that everyone see things differently. That is what makes it interesting. Architecture is a reflection of life and the contents of life are irony, humor, hyperbole, melancholia, despair and so on. Functionalists fall short of expressing all of that with their boxes.” Raise a parting glass to neo-functionalism.

It is important to note that much of this culture of fear and loathing is played out in the academies. Czech academic architects, teaching in the three Prague schools with professional design programs, are required to spend a major portion of their time and energy fending off attacks by entrenched senior faculty. An exception is architect Bořek Šípek, appointed Castle Architect by Václav Havel in the early 1990s. (Šípek volunteered and received no

compensation.) Šípek has sustained attacks by Czech architects since his return to Prague, from Holland, after the Velvet Revolution. His “*fauve*” design style is antithetical to the prevailing neo-functional aesthetic. Shrugging off criticism of his work at the Castle, Šípek has immersed himself in his international design work. Both an industrial designer (glass and furniture) and an architect (galleries and houses), Šípek is unperturbed by the *danse macabre*, unlike many architects in the Czech Republic hard pressed for commissions. The coming of the European Union to Central Europe (as early as 2003) will alter and intensify this game through an influx of foreign architects and the reciprocal opportunity for Czech architects to work in Western Europe.

## SAD PICTURE

A certain Madame M, a wealthy American from New York (widowed and in possession of a substantial fortune), has offered the City of Prague a highly prized collection of paintings by Czech František Kupka, collected by her deceased Czech husband, in return for a new museum for her eponymous foundation. The City offered up an old, crumbling mill on Kampa, an artificial “island” in the Vltava River formed by a Renaissance mill race and sparsely populated by Renaissance and Baroque buildings. Charles Bridge crosses the northern end of the “island”. A part of Malá Strana, the heart of the Left Bank, the structure has been abandoned and padlocked for decades and is guarded today by dogs and private security police.

Madame M organized a design competition for the part restoration, part conversion of the mill to a gallery with a restaurant, shops, and offices for the foundation. The design competition was officially sanctioned by the Czech Chamber of Architects and, therefore, strictly controlled by the rules of “open” competitions. The jury met in early 1999 to review the projects and found that Madame M had appointed herself president of the jury. After premiating three projects, the jury was instructed by the self-appointed president to award the commission to #19. Project 19 was submitted by a Viennese architect and friend of Madame M. The jury refused, Madame M annulled the competition in July, citing “corruption” – which, in fact, is correct – and threatened to withdraw the gift of Kupka paintings. The Mayor and City of Prague Administration rolled over and a new competition was announced. The so-called winner of this second competition will be required to work with Madame M’s friend in Vienna. The building is still crumbling while the “rules” of the new competition are ironed out and the winners of the first competition are hung out to dry. In the building’s “front yard” is Prague’s very own Needle Park.

## KAFKA’S CASTLE

Passing up the back steps to Hradčany (Prague Castle) and strolling through Slovene architect Josip Plečnik’s Paradise Garden (built on the ramparts in the 1920s), practicing Jacqueline Kennedy’s “blind sight” (looking straight ahead and slightly down), it is wise to rest briefly above the terraced Baroque gardens of Malá Strana. Allowing for the tourist hordes to pass by, it is then possible to quickly transit Plečnik’s Bull Stair to the Third Courtyard of Prague Castle. Taking a deep breath, and if you move quickly, you can then weave through the swarming tourists (notice the guide holding the telltale umbrella, electric cattle prod or mop head aloft) and past the mostly German Gothic (plus Romanesque/Gothic Revival) St. Vitus Cathedral. Entering the second courtyard, the passage through the Spanish Hall permits a speedy exit from the surging courtyards of the Castle. Passing the powder-blue uniformed sentries transfixed before striped pillboxes and the claue of camera-toting Euro-pensioners, it is possible to safely cross the bridge/causeway bisecting the Stag’s Moat, against the oncoming crowd. Skirting the presidential villa with American architect John Hedjuk’s “House of Suicide” and “House of the Mother of Suicide” memorial to Jan Palach in the back garden, you may then dash to the northwest end of the Royal Gardens and duck inside. Once past the gate, one is welcomed by an enfilade of historic buildings lining the garden designed by Italian Renaissance architect cosmopolites, including the sgraffitoed Royal Ball Court, and terminating in the lovely Renaissance Queen Anne “Belvedere” (“Summerhouse”). Nearby the Ball Court, British-Czech architect Eva Jiřičná’s newly minted Orangery sits just below the edge of the garden plateau, almost within the Harts’ moat where Austro-Hungarian Emperor Rudolf II kept wild deer. A very long glass vault supported by external steel truss work, the Orangery is off limits to the public. It is used apparently to rejuvenate plants from the interior of the Castle – “after their stint in national service”, as a friend quipped. It is, then, a “plant hospital”. The location is the exact site of a Renaissance Orangery built for Rudolf II. Life support for Renaissance citrus has metamorphosed into life support for the late-modern houseplant. The verdant waterless moat, below the Orangery, will remain “wild” nature, a somewhat naturalistic passage through the wildly touristic castle precinct. Nearly two-thirds of Prague Castle’s operating budget is subsidized by leasing historic castle properties to shops, pubs, and restaurants, and by annual blockbuster exhibitions orchestrated by the Castle Administration.

## O STAR PAVILION!

Walking to the Star Pavilion at White Mountain (Bílá hora) is a metaphysically disquieting experience these days. Site of the Battle of White Mountain in 1620, Bílá hora is a type of “Calvary” (“Golgotha”) for Czech nationalism. It is in the northwest suburbs of Prague, near Ruzyně International Airport. The pavilion, built in 1555-1557 by Habsburg Arch Duke Ferdinand (Rudolf II’s uncle), is a rare example of a building realized from the idealized plans of Italian Renaissance architectural theoretician Sebastiano Serlio. Inside, cryptic Ovid-inspired frescos remain “undecipherable”. The allegorical Mannerist paintings have defied the interpretive methodologies of art historians to this day.

It is said that former Czech hyper-capitalist Prime Minister Václav Klaus likes to roam the park. The Czech-German anti-Klaus graffiti on the park benches might confirm this rumor – “Heraus Klaus!” Bílá hora is covered with White Oak forest, which is cut through by radial axes originating with the points of the star-shaped plan of the pavilion. The wood is also said to be a favored haunting ground for Prague’s hardworking prostitutes – clients in tow. The radial woodland alleys serve the unintentional role of secluded parking groves. These twin rumors invite a Rabelais-inspired transliteration of Bílá hora – “buy la whora!”, American Dollars or Deutsche Marks preferred.

“Closed for reconstruction”, the Star Pavilion might serve as a secret *paysage moralisé* for the entire Czech post-communist maláise. The lush green lawn in front of the Star Pavilion, well within the surrounding wood and no doubt post-Battle of White Mountain, is said *sotto voce* to be the site of mass graves from the slaughter of 1612. The defeated Protestant armies were mostly Hungarian, German, Dutch, and Swedish princely militias with ex-pat Czech Protestant and mercenary troops in the ranks. The ex-pat Protestant Czech troops as well as their new-found North European brethren were somewhat shocked to find, upon their return to confront the Counter-Reformation Habsburg and Catholic armies, that much of the local population had gone over to the enemy in their absence. This bizarre anti-ex-pat complex continues today in the tortured body politic – architectural and otherwise. Prime Minister Klaus famously spearheaded the denial of restitution of property to ex-pat Czechs – primarily real estate seized during the communist regime – in the first years following the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Only recently have ex-patriots been allowed to reclaim their citizenship – albeit, well after restitution laws have expired.

This apocryphal graveyard, now trimmed with roses and plane trees, and forming a picturesque front lawn to the Star Pavilion, seems sadly and inexcusably devoid of purpose or meaning. The Villa will reopen as yet another gallery-tourist attraction and the hundreds, if not thousands of visitors – it is off the beaten track – will cross the preternaturally green lawn without any idea of its deeper significance. Most of the several million tourists that descend on Prague each year will miss it altogether anyway because of its remote location. They will spy its peculiar form from their airplanes as they descend to Ruzyně Airport. It is, nonetheless, the quintessential multi-national monument in a country that has always been cosmopolitan at heart. As an architectural icon, the Star Pavilion might also serve to remind Czech and non-Czech alike – as if that were necessary – that borders and nation states are mere articles of convenience in a world rapidly approaching its secret dream and origin, the horizontal integration of cultural difference. With its parallel flows of workers, ideas, and capital, horizontal integration is nothing new. Vertical integration, however, the stuff of hegemony and nightmares, is an altogether different matter.

GK (September 1999)



# THE BODY OF THE CITY

If you make your way to the top of the Žižkov television tower, or any other tower in Prague (Gothic, Baroque, or such), the panoramic views of the City are stunning; but these views are also relatively meaningless because they momentarily violate the scale and texture of the city and provide a privileged point of view not in keeping with the day-to-day experience of Prague. They are rare, pseudo-transcendent events, and they operate as symbolic exceptions (extensions) to the horizontal and optical unveiling of the city's "body".

The optical and psychological (haptic) effect of Prague's famous complex structure is also its conceptual-corporeal soul. This secretive power within the City's form reveals itself in a topological and topographical striptease – the zones between building complexes and at the edges of architectural formations emerge as if intimately offered to the *flâneur*, voyeur, and traveler. A slow, evolutionary form of intimacy, it is a value that is immanent, versus transcendent, residing within the physical, factual nature of the compact central city and, more primitively, more simplistically, in the more expansive, outer districts where vestiges of natural systems remain. This *frisson* (or nervous energy) comes to expression in its most potent form – as an optical, specular, and gestural dynamic – at the banks of the Vltava and on the peaks (Petřín, Hradčany, Vyšehrad, Letná) of the urban landscape. These in-between places are in many ways "erogenous" zones – passages or transitional features of the city-body formed by concentration, expansion, and interrelation. Such a dimension is not a dream or fantasy but very real, and primarily subliminally or unconsciously experienced.

It is with surprise, then, that Richard Meier and Partners' project planned for Pankrác, the ECM Radio Plaza, is promoted in the master plan documents as honoring this physiognomy when, in fact, Meier's transcendent, triumphalist, monumental and abstract architecture is completely at odds with this finely tuned, speculative substrata. The "detailed" urban analysis of Meier's master plan is purely formalistic and consistent with the utopian character of such dogmatic architectures.

The existing high-rise structures on the flattened hilltop in Prague 4, built in the 1970s, were and remain questionable objects placed without sensitivity to the immediate and comprehensive environs of the Right Bank. The re-cladding and multiplication of these objects with a ground-floor plaza that feigns or pretends to provide public open-space amenities is a rehearsing of the perennial fiction of modern urban planning, a ruse (trick), as the monumental character of the complex re-stages this classic error as, now, a "thoughtful, respectful, and forward-looking" urban typology.

Image (right) – Jean Nouvel's *Anděl* (c. 1999)

Angel City, and Golden Angel, by Jean Nouvel, in Smíchov, is, by comparison, a work of extraordinary delicacy. Its insertion into the working-class enclave in Prague 5 was the result of an entirely different process; that is, Nouvel's famous concept of "urban acupuncture". Meier's exercise in neo-monumentality builds upon a former flawed master plan and further exploits the location and infrastructure of a problematic commercial complex. Such complexes have suspect rationales for consuming public resources – for example, Rockefeller Center in Manhattan or La Défense in Paris.

Angel City does not pretend to offer public space – given its overt appropriation of streets, blocks, and, indeed, the subway (as clients). To claim so would be an obvious lie. Nouvel, instead, gave to the city an enigmatic, signature building/complex that speaks to the optical unconscious of Prague's collective existence. Meier and Partners offers only the image of a commercial acropolis, vaingloriously compared to Prague Castle in the master plan. ECM Radio Plaza, as proposed, serves only the grandeur of the commercial vision and not the city itself. Nouvel's project connects to the subversive, scopic (playful, voyeuristic) nature of the city and provides the Smíchov district with a figure of semi-tragic complexity and, therefore, immanence.



The so-called “landscape” ... Given that ECM Radio Plaza is to be built in seven phases, there is no way to guarantee that the faux (pseudo-) municipal or public gestures will be realized; and it is evident that the idea of landscape represented here is a fabulous tableau of stone and trees with generic green zones surrounding select buildings. There is, in fact, very little landscape to speak of, notwithstanding the proposed tree-lined avenues (boulevards) on the five sides of the site. (The statistical evidence for this lack of landscape is carefully concealed in the numerical data presented in the master plan document. Of the entire Pentagon site, 72,750 square meters are built form and 23,450 square meters are so-called green space. This first figure includes 321,100 square meters of real estate. The vast majority of space is paved plaza and the Pankrác Centrum includes even less landscape – though the plan claims 17 percent. If you subtract the two recreational pavilions included to boost the percentage of green space in this portion of the Pentagon, the result *for landscape* is exactly thirteen trees.) The emphasis on retail and office space (plus the storage of cars) claims the vast bulk of the site and the remainder is classic neo-modern, pseudo-public open space.

The complex is brazenly grand and ambitious. Too little concerned with its long-term impact on the city, with its out-sized demand on services, it represents a vigorous assault on the fragile structure of Prague and its physical complexity. It is the wrong language and the wrong message to the past and the future. It is also likely to be replicated around the city's edges, and, like the panel fields (the mid-rise concrete apartments blocks circling Prague), the model will further crush the last rich, heterogeneous reserves of the city and its lineaments – that is, the landscape and topographic features that lie just below the masonry and paving, bleeding and bruised, or subsist disfigured and as mere vestiges at the outskirts of the city.

GK (June 2001)

A version of this essay originally appeared, in Czech, in *Architekt* 8 (2001)



## POSTSCRIPT(S)

**Dvakrát k Pankrácké pláni** – Vlado Milunić (PES/CZ) – “Z duše mi mluví Gavin Keeney, který pochopil, že je v Praze nutné hledat podstatně hlubší kořeny než je avantgarda a Havlíček. Předpokladem je souznění s erotogenními zónami města. Neco podobného je platné také pro urychlovace. Uvádím záměrně příklad z jaderné fyziky, tak aby tomu rozumeli úplně všichni. Magnetické pole se musí nejdříve dostat na vlnovou délku elektronů a pak je postupně nalákat na jinou rychlost. Je to ne nepodobné tomu, když chci někoho sblížit.”

“I could sign the words of Gavin Keeney who has understood that in Prague it is necessary to search for substantially deeper roots than the avant-garde and Havlíček. The resonance (harmony?) with the erotogenic zones of the city is the precondition. The same principle counts for nuclear accelerators. I give an example from nuclear physics on purpose so that everyone understands. The magnetic field must first harmonize with the wavelength of the electrons and then it can seduce them to another velocity. Not unlike the situation when I want to chat up someone ...” (Translation by Michal Kavan)

Image (above) – View across Vltava River toward New Town, Prague, from Letná (c. 1999)

# GNOMIC WORKS: THE SCULPTURAL WORKS OF KURT GEBAUER

My first encounter with the work of Czech sculptor Kurt Gebauer occurred in 1995, the year his *Pyramidal Dwarf* (1992) appeared in St. George Square, in the third courtyard of Prague Castle. This pyramidal stone object (an all-but-abstract gnome) was situated in such a way that it aligned with the spires of St. George Church but deferred to the majestic Gothic (and neo-Gothic) pile of St. Vitus Cathedral, a conflation of effects based on the idea of the pinnacle and the blessed pointed head of ecclesiastical architecture. The irregular sandstone form (385 cm. tall) was fractured in two places – one intended, one caused by vandals – perhaps a coincidence, but certainly reminiscent of Josip Plečnik's obelisk, which also broke when it was being erected in the same courtyard over sixty years earlier. According to Gebauer, this particular sculpture was an exercise in "architectural logic" and "not a problem of genre", although it played in no small way with the synchronic vagaries of aspiration itself. Gebauer later explained the "logic" of the composition in purely formalistic terms – as negotiating the primary, Gothic syntax of the third courtyard – suggesting that, in this case, the primitive object transcends the anxiety-ridden genre of politicized works of art. (*Pyramidal Dwarf* was subsequently moved to the Deer Moat, "below Prague Castle", where it resides at this time amid the verdure of the naturalistic ravine that slices through the castle mount.)

It was immediately following this encounter with the tectonic, giant "dwarf" (a complete contradiction/ contraction of terms), that I met Kurt Gebauer, finding him at his home *not coincidentally* adjacent to the official residence of President Václav Havel – as they have been friends since Havel's days as dissident playwright – and not far from the Castle. In his garden were the various grotesque gnomes (Trpasličí) – that is, fibreglas/resin versions – that he first illicitly deployed in 1985 (at Galerie H, Kostelec nad Černými Lesy) in a mock send-up of so-called "normalization" under the Communists. *Dwarf Monument*, a large menacing dwarf with arm raised, and *Dwarf Dog* also first appeared in 1985, in Vojanovy Sady (Vojan Park), Prague. Indeed, *Dwarf Monument* later went on tour, in 1987, traveling to New York, Paris, Berlin, Regensburg, and Helsinki. These were the formal precursors to *Pyramidal Dwarf*, though the ideas animating them are traceable to a set of drawings called *Normalization* (two dwarfs beating a skull) from 1972. Gebauer finally created the first set of dwarfs in 1985, eight in ten days, as a parody of Czech society in the last, dark days of communist rule.

Image (right) – *Running Girl* and *On A Swing* (Zlín, 2001)

In the 1950s and 1960s, Czech artists had agitated against the "genocide of gnomes" – mocking the roundup of bourgeois cultural practices perpetrated by the State Security (STB) apparatus. In Gebauer's imagination this confrontation took the form of a hybridization of forms deriving monumentality from the Social Realist sculpture of the period and combining it with the diminutive stature typical of the garden gnome/dwarf – a clash between totalitarian *diktat* and good old-fashioned bourgeois bad taste. Gebauer's gnomes became – post Velvet Revolution (1989) – bored, idle secret police-type gnomes, unable to cope (in 1995) with the post-communist state of things. One guzzled beer from a tankard, half reclining on one elbow and slowly rotting into the earth. Other gnomes leaned, perched, and hid amid the ramshackle garden. One (*Myslitel* or *Thinker*) – seated on the wall of the garden separating Gebauer's residence and Havel's – was painted red. Another (*Bachar*) was perched in the trees and held a crude wooden rifle "guarding" (as it were) Havel's flank. Another had "leapt" the wall entirely and taken up residence in Havel's garden. This latter gnome, code-named *Fizl*, was spying (hand raised over eyes)



ostensibly for interlopers, but more likely on President Havel (“Making sure he was working”, said Gebauer). Also in Gebauer’s garden (a kind of morgue for his retired exhibitions) were the buxom bathing damsels from *Bohemian Pond* (c. 1988, re-deployed in Vojanovy Sady, Prague, in 2000).

All of this explication led to a conversation on the nature of representation (vis-à-vis repression), which to Gebauer requires going “only so far”. To go any further than “only so far” risks either the atrocious or the bathetic. For Gebauer, this translates into an artistic process that unveils both natural and unnatural “chemical” cultural and personal relationships (“elective affinities”, perhaps). Nature and human nature combine in relationships that are sustainable and pleasant. Nature and culture often combine, on the other hand, to produce the tragic.

Gebauer’s exceptional restraint is focused in a unique intellectual-emotional realm that combines concepts and feelings. This liminal zone is “the heart” – the true seat of the mind. The work often is mordantly comic and even dark, but it is never self-conscious or merely parodic. The art of (the sometimes lacerating) gesture is at the heart of this “zone” (half-nether region) – a figure of resistance to both dogma and to refinement. It is a half-inarticulate, half-articulate shadowland where some things are best left unsaid (*pace* Wittgenstein). From this extraordinary place that resides in everyone still breathing (thinking/feeling) comes, however, whispers, echoes, and cries – of both primordial angst and raucous, preternatural joy.

The limits of Gebauer’s art are self-imposed. Working typically (and deliberately) with found rock forms, plaster, or resin, Gebauer shapes these raw materials only so far as necessary – the work is less gnostic than Beuys, and most Fluxus fabrications, but related in the sense that Gebauer has sought not to create aesthetic objects so much as to provoke aesthetic reflection. A very small, delicate portion of his production is almost fully realized “life forms” – not quite full-scale to indicate the therapeutic degree of separation from realism Gebauer maintains in the rare instances when he ventures in the direction of full-blown figuration. Some of these figures from the 1970s (*Weirdie Girl*, *Running Girl*, and *On A Swing*) are extraordinarily lyric (and “singular”, or compressed into a state of extraordinary tension). In the case of *Running Girl* (1975), every gesture of the young girl “in flight” contains the expression of unfettered freedom that her almost startled face conveys. The flying hair, the folds and creases of her wind-swept shirt dress, and the out-swung arms all portray the same elemental *joie de vivre* and innocence coupled with nervous tension.

Image (right) – *Weirdie Girl* (Zlín, 2001)

It was Gebauer’s retrospective exhibition in the famous industrial city of Zlín (“home” of Baťa) in 2001 (at the State Gallery) that sealed my impressions regarding Gebauer’s mysterious poetic sensibility; something operating outside of/beyond any identifiable norm. Gebauer’s famous Studio of Universal Sculpture at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design (Prague) also produced a parallel exhibition in Zlín by his students (“Universal Sculpture”) that was at best provocative and at worst incoherent. Gebauer’s effect was evident in the rustic materiality of the presentations and in the wry, sometimes absurd ideational constructs pictured, but what was missing was that exquisite personal sensibility that pushes his work into an indefinable category, a category that includes a prescience for the sublime *and* the ridiculous, but a personal territory that also contains secret algorithms for sustaining life against all forms of extremism – something that cannot be transmitted to students nor captured, thankfully, in words.



GK (April 2002)

A version of this essay appeared in *New Presence: Prague Journal of Central European & World Affairs* (Summer 2002)



## OUTTAKES

Krajská galerie výtvarného umění ve Zlíně (State Gallery, Zlín) – <http://www.zlin.cz/sgz/>  
 Kurt Gebauer – <http://www.kurtgebauer.cz>

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Image (below) – *On A Swing* (Zlín, 2001)



# HOUSE OF THE WIND: MAY DAY

Out of one window, Žižkov Television Tower ... Out of another (opposite), Plečnik's Church of the Sacred Heart ... Vinohrady, Prague ... Nearby, Olšanské hřbitovy, a mostly 19th-century cemetery (a nominally "dead" cemetery, and, therefore, very much alive), necropolis, jam-packed, crumbling mausolea-lined streets and avenues, ivy-covered iron crosses, tombs upon tombs, as many as twelve burials per plot ... Plot upon plot (subplot by subplot) ... Narrative lines twirled in time (lost) in a sign of "the given", and "the taken-away" ... Encased, engulfed in an urban forest ... urban chasm (chaosmos) ... One mausoleum or two now fully restored, others boarded, bricked-up and/or broken (vandalized), abandoned, yet not forgotten ... A tomb designed by Jan Kotěra (neo-classicist and Secession-inspired Czech architect), assisted by an artist (name slipped away, now, from memory, unrecognized) ... Jan Kotěra, the renowned architect whom invited Plečnik to Prague in the 1920s? ...

Crazy Daisy (U Sládečků) café nearby, entered through a red, British phone booth ... Shades of time-traveling ... Ancient (antique) appliances and accouterments of times past adorning walls, ledges, shelves ... Stove-top toaster ... Concertina, French horns ... Defunct Granta, Simplex, Royal, Remington typewriters ... Tennis racket and press ... Mantle with clocks, all telling different times, cameras, lantern, radio ... An undulating caerulean-blue ceiling cloth with golden stars "penetrated" by the severed trunk of a birch tree (*axis mundi*) ... Consumer detritus from another era (eras), two days following May Day and the Czech Lands' entry into the EU, street parades, parties and demonstrations, oddly at odds, marking the moment, marking time-always-passing ... Almost 200 years of history buried in the wild, overgrown temenos of Vinohrad cemetery across the way ... New granite cube, fan-paving has been added at the entrance road just inside the main gate ...

Monuments ... Doors left ajar, frozen in stone ... Bored (idling) angels ... Brooding putti/bambini ... Half-abstracted willow/wisteria ... Obelisk, urns, trace of angel gone (flown/stolen) ... Graveyard of funerary syntax (styles/histories) ... Gothic-baroque syntheses, diminutive Romanesque rotunda (engulfed in shadows, with saplings and grass sprouting from its tiled roof) ... Monstrous granite bell-shaped tombeau ...

Lime (Tilia) alleys, maple seedlings bursting forth here and there, ivy clamoring over most everything, occasional walnut ... Wild herbs, forbs, wandering vines ... Generic garden plants and otherwise gone astray ... "Weeds" ... Nettle, myrtle, ferns, Rosa, Viola, dandelion ...

A house where the wind lives ... Empty awaiting new tenants ... Photographer Jan Saudek's atelier one floor below where these words now appear ... Photographer/aesthetician of paradoxes ... The empty room swept by the breezes sweeping in through open windows ... All windows left open to sweep away the past ... Some furnishings, a single pot to boil water ... Empty cabinets and wardrobes, strange green upholstered couch and chair ...

The wind inhabits this house, pulsing, breathing ... The windows sigh, opening and closing, nothing fixed, latches warped, fittings decayed, worn, never meeting ... Water runs slowly across the kitchen floor, leaking from the drain of the sink, a stream marked (now) by two sets of footprints ...

The world unwound ... All things in their own time ... Erasures and re-writings ... What is needed is reverse landscape architecture (and reverse architecture), to erase things outmoded, useless, to open space (new space/time) to other things, to some-thing else, to undo what has been wound too tightly, overwrought, manic things that occlude everything else, /S/ (Spirit) ... The night-sky is always there, even at mid-day (with tea), seen from the "now" of/within the imagination ... The "sound" foundation of things to which all things return, from which all things arrive (appear) and are freely given ... Erasing things "writes" other things (some-times), allows what is continually repressed to make its way into the world, along its own axis, in its own manner of speaking, and in its own time ...

GK (May 2004)



# ARCHITECTURAL EYEWASH: PRAHA 2004

In the Kaleidoskop column of *Respekt* 21 (May 17-23, 2004), Praha's finest newspaper, architectural historian (and specialist on the subject of early 20th-century Czech architecture) Zdeněk Lukeš unleashed a scorching (sardonic) critique of the Czech Chamber of Architects' Grand Prix for architecture, denouncing (mocking) the picturesque nature of the annual competition.<sup>(1)</sup> In particular, he lambastes its dependence on pure imagery, especially glamorous photographic, almost pornographic images taken in the evening, striking images of depopulated buildings glowing from within, in the half-light, a type of long-exposure photography that can make any building whatsoever look ravishing. Lukeš seconds Sir Colin Stansfield Smith (member of the 2004 Grand Prix board), arguing that the jury should visit all of the buildings vying for the award and interview the users (as well as the investors), while also conceiving of a prize that defies the existing categories (residence, office building, urban plan, etc.), embracing, then, the totality (the existential gestalt) of the works under review (waiting, if necessary, a few years before considering a building for an award).

In the impressionistic harangue, Lukeš goes on to describe the ludicrous project for a Salvador Dalí museum in Praha (by "galerista Miro Smolák") for a non-existent collection of paintings. This tale already begins to perversely resemble the origins of the museum recently installed in an old mill, Sovovy mlýny, on Kampa, an island hugging the Left Bank of the Vltava. A city-owned building, it was leased to a foundation established after an absurd and botched design competition, innocently authorized by the Czech Chamber of Architects, and based on the premise that the museum (and, therefore, the city) would receive a collection of František Kupka paintings from the widow of a wealthy Czech ex-pat. The Dalí House fantasy also seems to summarize the current state of art-architecture, here and there, or the speculative élan of high-end and boutique museums designed by star architects (a.k.a. starchitects). "Here" (in Praha) Daniel Libeskind has been invited to submit a design. Few people in the official Praha art scene seem to want or understand the need for this newest imposition, although, as always, the city will decide behind mostly closed doors what is what (what is useful and what is not).

While Lukeš was venting his spleen in the pages of *Respekt*, the May 12-25, 2004 issue of the *Prague Post* (Vol. 14, No. 20) reported, in a front-page article entitled "Maverick architect eyes site on Vltava", that Smolák and Libeskind favor building the Dalí House on the embankment at the end of Revoluční Street. The article describes the controversy, who's for and who's against (the mayor seems to be "for"), making passing and ill-informed references to the Vlado Milunić/Frank Gehry Dancing Building (a.k.a. the Nederlander Building and/or the Fred and Ginger Building) on the embankment in the New Town and Jean Nouvel's Zlatý Anděl tucked into Prague-Smíchov, across the river.<sup>(2)</sup> Both of *these* buildings actually respect their respective locations, whereas Libeskind's proposed architectural object/icon (the "transformation of a circle into a square and back again into a circle") would sit awkwardly amidst the mostly low-rise buildings along the bend of the river in the Old Town. A single "authorized" rendering reproduced by various print and electronic media shows the building, in perspective, bursting forth into the warped perspectival space (picture plane) of architectural (mis)representation. Oddly, the *Prague Post* somehow manages to describe the Dalí House as a "seven-storey gallery", whereas the rendering, "taken" from across the river along the embankment, shows an expansive, aggressive volumetric something-or-other that is clearly not seven storeys. Yet missing storeys is part and parcel of every architectural tall-tale. Apparently some architects looking at Praha from far away still see a naïve city susceptible to the usual architectural eyewash that passes as "realism", while, in fact, present-day architectural rhetoric (inclusive of photo-realistic renderings) is almost always selling a fantasy. What is most unsettling (bizarre), however, is that Libeskind's strident rendering of the Dalí House actually overstates (*over sells*) the arrogance of the building and he ends up (once again) with his foot in his mouth.

Nouvel's Anděl project (an office and shopping complex) for ING is a not-inelegant example of so-called "urban acupuncture", mostly delightful impositions (urbanistic interpellations) that release latent (pent-up) energies, in the case of Anděl, in a somewhat down-at-the-heels, working-class neighborhood long slated in various 20th-century urban plans as an alternative city center. Thousands of workers pass through this section of the city daily on foot, on the subway, and by tram (streetcar). It is not Nouvel's fault if Smíchov's pent-up energy was primarily real-estate speculation and rampant consumer desire for the latest in fashionable (and expensive) things.

On the other hand, Milunić's Dancing Building (it is said that Gehry was merely called in to provide "starchitect" cachet for the developer) "dances" provocatively, but with a modicum of decorum, *within* the folded street-wall of the Right Bank, at the intersection of two busy thoroughfares, one heading straight across the Vltava, the other along its embankment. The deluxe restaurant on the ground floor and the twisted, open floor plans of the upper offices (with erratically placed windows that offer your knee or the ceiling fan a view of the Vltava) may provide a glamorous retreat for Praha's trend-setting entrepreneurial set, yet the building was thoroughly vetted through both official and unofficial (favorable and vicious) criticism, as will be the Dalí House. Milunić (with Gehry) and ING (again) prevailed with the assistance of then President Václav Havel, resolutely leaning in favor of the project (he formerly lived just down the street, during the communist years, and his once-affluent family, once upon a time developers, once owned a portion of the block). The finishing touch of the Dancing Building, the curiously crumpled cupola, was ceremoniously flown into place by a Soviet-era military helicopter.

As a footnote to Praha's illustrious 1990s makeover, after the 1989 Velvet Revolution, it was Havel, working with architect-designer Bořek Šípek (nominally Castle Architect throughout the Velvet Presidency), who altered the iconography (and iconology) of the Castle (always Kafka's "Castle") by strategic interventions within the compound, including his somewhat wild new entrance to the President's Office, in the Second Courtyard. Šípek also brought his Sottsass-inspired aesthetic to the interiors, a curious blend of effects and affects that are no doubt in the process of being erased (if they are not already erased) by Havel's successor (and enemy) Thatcherite neo-conservative Václav Klaus, head of the appropriately named, right-leaning ODS party.<sup>(3)</sup>

As for the "hypothetical collection of works by Dalí" cited in the Lukeš send-up, the *Prague Post* explains: "The proposed museum would house some 1,500 works by the Spanish surrealist, most of them on loan from the Dalí Foundation in Figueres, Spain, and from German collector Richard Meier. Additionally, it would contain space for exhibitions, a theater, shops, a library, a depository for contemporary art and accommodations for artists."<sup>(4)</sup> These redundancies (vagaries of the architectural program) perhaps account for the inexplicable bulk of the Dalí House rendering, suggesting, in turn, that the project is, in fact, a stalking horse for a complex real estate pyramid scheme (and the paper confirms the rumor that one of the investors is, indeed, a Russian bank).

Dubbed Dalí House, at first (and in Libeskind's brash renderings), Smolák has since backed off and now refers to the proposed facility as the "Palace of Art Prague". Echoing the bombast of the Richard Meier & Partners Architects' high-rise project at Pankrác (i.e., the architect, not the above-mentioned art collector), a project now dramatically scaled back.<sup>(5)</sup> Libeskind is quoted in the *Prague Post* article as saying (remarks most likely taken from the official press release): "It's very much related to Prague, to the forms and traditions of Prague, it tells a story that intersects Dalí and 20th-century art, Prague, the 21st century and imagination."<sup>(6)</sup> As if that was not quite enough, Libeskind adds: "If you don't have a future, you don't have a past, and if you don't have a past, you won't have a future."<sup>(7)</sup> The Dalí House is projected to cost 700 million koruna (CZK) or 26 million dollars (USD) if it ever sees the light of day. Meanwhile, "galerista Smolák" runs his limited-edition art operation from a decommissioned church, near Strahov Monastery.

GK (June 2004)

## ENDNOTES

- 1 – Zdeněk Lukeš, "Jak hodnotit architekturu, Dalí v Vltavě ...", *Respekt*, vol. XV, no. 21 (May 17-23, 2004): p. 18.
- 2 – For a report on Nouvel's Anděl project, see Gavin Keeney, "Enduring Obstacles and Angst, Nouvel's Prague Plan Progresses", *Architectural Record*, vol. 187, no. 10 (October 1999).
- 3 – The Havel-Šípek era at Prague Castle has recently been documented in Petr Volf's *Václav Havel-Bořek Šípek: Hradní práce 1992-2002* (Praha: Breda, 2003); text in Czech and English.
- 4 – *Prague Post*, vol. 14, no. 20 (May 12-25, 2004): p. 1.
- 5 – For a critique of this project, see Gavin Keeney, "The Body of the City", *Architekt* 8 (September 2001).
- 6 – *Prague Post*, vol. 14, no. 20 (May 12-25, 2004): p. 2.
- 7 – Ibid.

# MORAVIAN SHADOWS

“For the rapture of the Dionysian state with its annihilation of the ordinary bounds and limits of existence contains, while it lasts, a lethargic element in which all personal experiences of the past become immersed. This chasm of oblivion separates the worlds of everyday reality and of Dionysian reality. But as soon as this everyday reality re-enters consciousness, it is experienced as such, with nausea: an ascetic, will-negating mood is the fruit of these states.”(1) – Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872)

“Every theory is a working hypothesis fostered by our interest in the facts themselves: theory is essential for sorting out the pertinent facts and ordering them in a system – it is for that and no more. The very need for some particular set of facts, the very prerequisite of having some particular conceptual sign – these are conditions dictated by contemporary life with its specific problems. History is, in effect, a science of complex analogies, a science of double vision: the facts of the past have meanings for us that differentiate them and place them, invariably and inevitably, in a system under the sign of contemporary problems. Thus one set of problems supplants another. History in this sense is a special method of studying the present with the aid of the facts of the past.”(2) – Boris M. Ejxenbaum, “Literary Environment” (1929)

## I. THE BIRTH OF SHADOWS



Image (left) – View from Pernštejn Castle tower (near Nedvědice, Czech Republic)

Shadows imply three-dimensionality in a physical, formal sense and four-dimensionality in a higher, phenomenal modality – i.e., in the latter case, that sense that suggests the passage of time and the presence of the past (absence). The second sense of shadows requires a meta-aesthetic, perhaps metaphysical ambiance in the play of light and dark that does not merely supplement but completes the physical dimensionality of built and natural form.

In Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Shadows* (1872) shadows are not mentioned per se but inferred in the Apollinian-Dionysian dyad, the interpenetrating of the shining one (Apollo) and the dark one (Dionysus). Shadows fall, as it were, across the Greek stage, and in all classical philology, as a representational language of exegetical interpolation – deducing the here from the there – an intimation of those antinomies (opposing and imposing forces) Nietzsche identified as animating and attendant to the birth of tragedy. These forces are much more proscribed today than even in Nietzsche’s time, and might be summarized as the underlying (unruly) generative codes of cultural systems – the repressed sublimity of systems and the prime gesture of the episteme (formerly the *Zeitgeist*). The raw, unbridled nature of nature (the inner nature of nature) is a doubled nature that is not merely the sign of the natural but also the foundation stone of the concept of the preternatural (and the primordial) or the so-called “divine ground” (not to be mistaken for an ontological ground) – or, in part, the mostly subterranean system of “things hidden since the foundation of the world” (the titanic realms of the pre-Olympian gods, for sure, but also the very battle of the Olympian gods to humanize the structure of things and hold at bay the tragic undercurrents of life here and there). These are the penultimate “abstract” generative forces that animate shadows – the underlying struggle for taking-place, for the enunciation of being (for calling forth collective being). Beyond Apollo – the sun – is the world of archaic, vital, wild, incoherent, allusive, fetching, sometimes savage, often revolutionary antecedents to the frozen, fixed, polished, day-lit, practical, orderly, effete, and merely formal rules and idioms of commonplace life.

The anti-Nietzschean nonsense that such is a picture of chaos and violence itself conveys the necessary aversion to “shadows” required to favor and privilege the so-called pure land of clarity, order, and light. “Sweetness and light” is Nietzsche’s borrowed, Victorian terminology for mocking the naive pleasure found in light culture (a culture of vast repressions) devoid of shadows and adumbration of depth. Formal systems, as provisional systems, require as *mise en scène* a stage cleared of ambiguity and incoherence – a theater cleared of divine madness and inspiration. Hence Antonin Artaud’s polemic, *The Theater and Its Double* (1938) ... Hence too Tristan Tzara and Hugo Ball’s madcap theatrics in Zurich, at the Cabaret Voltaire, following on the mass destruction of World War I ... Language it seems, in its most abstract instantiation, is oddly at odds with this other “abstract”; it cannot contain it. Logic, nominally, brooks no shadows or aporia while relying on illogical and farcical repressions. *A priori* is white light; logic bathes itself in this light and is the systematic denaturing of the vast wilderness of linguistic substructure.

Hence Ludwig Wittgenstein's hyper-logical *Tractatus* (1921) and his later reversal of his own prohibitions against "everything else" ... In shadow resides this *everything else* – e.g., intimations of the immortal, catastrophic infinitude underwriting daylight. The fascinating glimmering (fluctuating tonalities) of dimmed (fading and/or passing) light is not available to night. Dimmed light is effectively half-light, twilight, not the absence of light nor the great plenitude of the midnight sky. Within the night sky moves celestial beings. Within the half-lit, sub-lunar world moves lesser gods and (if the Gnostics are to be believed) the demi-urge ...

The gnomon of the sundial divides the light "disclosing the hour". Below the upright figure, a metonym for the upright human being and human subjectivity, falls the shadow – a horizontal shade that crosses and climbs all obstructing objects, projecting into the recesses of time and space (and the mind). (Sigmund Freud built his insights on the unconscious by problematizing this "uprightness", in "Civilization and Its Discontents", 1930.) The fourth dimension, time, emerges in a speculative turn of mind, upon reflection, the doubling of mind, in the interstices of measure and projection (systems dividing chaos, most notably pictured in William Blake's demi-urge, the so-called Ancient of Days). The fallen world of appearances – of anamorphic forms – is the realm of distortion and attenuation. The quest to purify this realm of its disturbing irreality requires the conceptual sign of the void (the Absolute) – the metaphysical cancellation of the anamorphic, distraught figures of half-light. Abstract paired with abstract yields nil – nothing can survive in the excessive glare (or vertiginous black) of the void (hence all utopias are endlessly deferred and/or the Cloud of Unknowing engulfs every-thing). The superlative value of the void stands as the empty vessel of duration, the long insufferable now (and often a condition falsely identified with the universal or timeless). Typically formulated as the most prescient, non-forward-looking configuration of time and space – the conceptual sign of the void (the universal) is, in fact, an existential holding pattern (or joint-stock "trading" company) suspended in a second nothingness. Filled with light or filled with night (darkness), the void is no longer of this world; it is a dematerialization (not unlike the "capita" of late-capitalism). It is no longer void, however, when it is crossed by shadow (or penetrated by light), when shadows cross its face revealing its perimeter, its containment of volume and its emptiness as a ruse. It is not possible, after all, to posit a true void except in the mind. A void is a stratagem (an abstraction) until it falls victim to reality (contingency), and reality – in its factual, actual sense – does not permit the survival of the void. The real voids the void, filling it with incipient new life, at first the shadow and, then, everything that follows in the path of this half-light. Here is the origin of the cyclical nature of all revolutionary formalisms – e.g., those oftentimes extreme formalisms that accompanied the arrival and morpho-genetic development of modernity, or the birth of new cultural systems, from the Renaissance to the Russian Revolution, from Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Giordano Bruno to Boris Ejxenbaum, Mixail Baxtin and Roman Jakobson (by way of the French Revolution) – illustrating the intense, dialectical nature of history with its own inherent, structural ruse, offering itself up as "past past" to restructure and impose/condition a "present past". The common understanding that nature abhors a vacuum is but a reflection of this more sublime truth. Something – whatever – must fill up and overflow in time. That this same something (whatever) is underwritten by vast shadowlands is the great, open secret. That radical works are essentially "futural" (from the future) is, in turn, a second ruse insofar as this "futural" aspect is meant to circumvent the everyday hegemony of the present past, a present (only in name) that Ernst Bloch rightly identified, in *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918), as a just passed present, or "there" versus "here".

## II. THE CZECH LANDS

Moravia is a land of shadows, its historic legacy built-up over ten centuries. Ask a Czech where the deepest, most profound shadows are and they will mention the forest, not castles and cloisters. This relation to culture is dialectical and expressed typically by ennui – a surfeit of dealing with the vast terrain of Czech history. The earliest kingdoms are the stuff of fairy tales and legends, the most recent regimes the stuff of nightmares.

Czech history and the Czech lands are littered with ruins, the remains of conquests, compromises, and catastrophes. Bohemia and Moravia are buried deep in the long shadows of imperial conquest and pacts with neighboring regimes. An Austro-Hungarian "thicket", the architectural-cultural structure of this central European territory is thick with intrigue. Nature is a respite, a time out or a time without these horrors. The hilltop castles and the urban strongholds remain as witnesses to the layered, clotted texture of Czech historiography. It is ironical, then, that Mies van der Rohe's Villa Tugendhat (in Brno, Moravia) was purposely constructed to frame a view to Spilberk Castle, a castle that plays a minor, but sinister role in Stendhal's great novel *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839), as specter, the ghastly nature of the hilltop prison "disinterestingly" reduced to a picturesque thing by the iconic, modern villa (built by a brilliant, reductive modernist architect and rigorously trashed by Karel Teige, "*enfant terrible* of the

Czech avant garde” in the early 1930s).

Nominally a “Catholic country”, the Czechs remain, *per force*, pagans. Where nature and architecture meet there is a storied, ambient admixture of memory and forgetting (selective amnesia). In the orchards or parks of Czech cities one is mostly outside time, momentarily, save the intrusion of the occasional historic monument and the ever-present wrapper – e.g., walls, edges, gates, ramparts. The parks and orchards are almost cultural voids but not quite emptied yet of the detritus of history. The park is often the provisional void surrounded and crisscrossed by the structural shadows of the historic city. Nature overruns the architectural forms of past eras and comes to an uneasy truce with the persistence of hewn stone and articulated ruins. (Thus, for half-polemical reasons, the Czech communist regime let the mostly Baroque-era palaces and gardens of Malá Strana rot and slowly sink into oblivion.) The Hunger Wall runs up the south-facing slope of the modest but “vast” 327-meter high Petřín, a mostly green enclave near Prague Castle, in Malá Strana (the Lesser Quarter), and straight to Strahov, the great monastic pile built in the Counter Reformation. Along this 14th-century wall are breaks and crumbling portions all buried in the sylvan entourage, deep in green shade and almost dreaming a five-century gap in the warp and woof of time. The Hunger Wall, built by Charles IV to help feed idle workers after the completion of the then-new New Town, serves as a hinge between the past past and the present past – i.e., a crumbling hinge notable for its revered status as the post-communist, cowboy-capitalist political-business cabal now running the country into the ground “tunnels” (loots) the last assets from public ministries and public companies on the road to total privatization of the Czech economy.

Cultural shadows are, of course, unstable; they require critical examination – imagination – to appear and disappear. They are non-objective, fleeting formulations prompted by very real, quotidian shadows. Thus, they have been called shades, or ghosts, figments, as it were, of the penumbra, the transitional zone between light and shadow. In deep shadow there is nothing. Perhaps this transitional zone is the same place that Lucretius denotes as the domain of the gods, the so-called *intermundia* ...

The implication for architectural and landscape-architectural design (and for discursive praxis, or criticism) is profound. Shadow play incorporates the full scope of theoretical and analytical praxis – viz., to “do shadows” is to theorize depth (the distance implicit and sometimes explicit in all things). In design the shadow comes with the architectonic; it is an effect of the concatenation of forms. Baroque facades seem to delight in and anticipate the evening; the long angles of the setting sun. In winter these surfaces are alive with creeping patterns of light and shade. The shadowy recesses of buildings massed to dramatic effect suggest tragic interpolations – the arcade or the peristyle suggest zones of spatial intrigue, of conflict and conniving, of secretive and furtive, clandestine and covert activities. Hence the immense élan of the neoclassical, topological painting (and painted architectural *fabrique* as rubric), Jacques-Louis David’s *Oath of the Horatii* (1784), *pace* Jean Starobinski, summing up the potential of the deeply shadowed arcade to represent vast layers of political intrigue. The portico and the loggia are transitional, liminal places (noetic, figurative gestures) that invite both assignation and assassination. There is the dangerous passage from interior to exterior, or vice versa, in the typological place of exchange, and the strategic transfer of one condition to another. At the entrance of the grotto is the liquid expression of figures and textures that represent and instigate metamorphosis. Danger haunts such transitional passages.

The metamorphic threshold (re-deployed in late-modern architecture as “event horizon”, i.e., the entrance to a black hole where things are atomized), or the penumbra, is emblematic of the gray zone, the shadowy swath (nether land) of the mind where stillness (light) and echoes (darkness) come to meet one another. In the “green” shade of trees there is a type of “riparian” excess, below the canopy. In the unseen root zone and rhizosphere, therein exists a complex of relationships and forces that nourishes the tree. The tree is mirrored below ground, in its ramified root system, as it is above ground by its trunk and branch system. In summertime is the added effect, in deciduous trees, of the flowering and leaf-bearing mass. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe pictured this unfolding as a primal evocation of the *urphlantz* – the leaf being the prototypical (signature) form of plant growth. In *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790), Goethe reloads the almost spent concept of entelechy, showing in verse form how the plant proceeds from bud to leaf to flower through a spiraling outward offset by a periodic turning inward represented by the clasped form of a pair of young leaves only to, in time, burst into bloom and launch pollen and then seeds into its very own “literary environment”, the place of the plant’s taking-place. Below ground, in the warmth of summer’s soil, is the extraordinary, parallel alchemical activity of fungal, insect, and arthropod communities – a chemistry sprung to life in the generative matrix hidden in the darkness of the earth. The “green” shade of the shadow of the tree canopy buzzes with a life matched by its efflorescence in summer, of flowers and leaves – the linden, for example, teaming with the additional license of honey bees gathering pollen. The subterranean mirror world is alive with the chemical

storm that nature reserves to provoke an above-ground explosion of form and effect. Hence William Butler Yeats' "Come live in the house of the stare" ...

Porta Coeli, a Cistercian abbey in Moravia, near the provincial town of Tišnov, is nestled between the green hills with a rumored pagan shrine to the west and the rising sun to the east. The gate to the grounds of the cloister opens at a 90-degree bend in a busy commercial street, with the rumbling passage of cars, lorries, and buses. Within the gate is a long, irregular green (commons) pierced by the entrance drive with a thick planting of linden trees creating a blinding darkness. The trees are only 100 years old (perhaps) but form a dense passage with glimpses of the Gothic-Baroque church beyond illumined by rays of light from the passing sun. The entry court is surrounded by buildings of different periods and the original fabric of the compound is lost in these additional, utilitarian layers and emendations. There is, however, an explicit point where the geometric relationship of the buildings is quite pronounced and a glimpse into the past past is provided. This hinge is the classic perspectival hinge of Medieval planning and is all the more evident due to the erasures that have occurred over time. Enclosing walls have come down and vanished, and the volumes of the buildings now surrounded by mature trees stand in stark relief and disclose their relationship to one another more profoundly than if they were still wrapped in the masonry of the fortifications. The splashes of light that reveal these forms are now modulated by the play of shadow from the grove of trees. The main passage was once a muddy thoroughfare (in the days when the cloister still functioned as a commercial trading post). Today it is a reflective, naturalistic approximation of the "before" and "after" of architecture.

The outer buildings and the passage through the lindens all lead to the celebrated portal (with tympanum) of the Gothic church, guarded by twin lions, Christ, and his twelve apostles. Marauding, 17th-century Swedish troops are said to have lopped off the head of one lion, but it has been patched up. The 19th-century statue of Emperor Franz-Josef, from the inner court, and facing the tympanum, is missing (only the pedestal remains); it is perhaps at the bottom of the nearby lake. The interior of the church offers an entirely man-made shade, a sanctuary built to the glory of the Church Triumphant and penetrated by rays of light through carefully articulated windows of colored glass, including a monumental Medieval rose window. The glory of the vast volume of enclosed space is cut through by this light and the ravishing decorative arts of the Baroque assault the senses, with the ritualized space of the altar as the central spectacle. From within the arcaded innermost courtyard of the cloister one can, wrapped within the volume of the entire ensemble (while looking up), detect traces of the Romanesque church buried below the Baroque. These traces are discernible in the articulation of the outer walls below the eaves of the sanctuary, and in the detailing of the cubic tower supporting the main bell tower. This Romanesque "scaffolding" yet supports the Baroque church, as the Gothic portal and tympanum announce yet another layer within the architectural *mise en scène*, leading inward (picturing a "telescopic" falling out of time by way of a series of diminishing, receding "representational" doors) to the sacred void of the sanctuary, filled, in turn, with the ravishing gestural arts of the Baroque interior.

This second, interior shadowland is a virtual shadowland – it is an imaginary vessel devoted to transcendence, versus immanence. The world of nature, by contrast, represents the ever-fallen, post-Edenic world of human endeavor, whereas the Church attempts to prepare a privileged zone, a purely reflective vehicle for the transfiguration of the tragic. These sanctuaries perform the ancient rite of passage to another land – a great ark on a sea of turbulence – closed off from the impure land of natural and preternatural agitation, that world of shadows unredeemed by the magical reconfiguration of the world within the cloister and abbey. The royal patrons of this sacred ark (buried beneath its stones) purchased one-way passage to glory after despoiling the world at large through *de rigueur* dynastic machinations. The "vague green twilight" of the natural world – Julien Gracq's words from *Chateau d'Argol* (1938) – is yet haunted by such vainglories, by scandals, treachery, and capitulation.<sup>(3)</sup> Perhaps it was St. Francis, erstwhile troubadour, who came closest to the sublime truth that "Heaven" is actually *this world* made virtuous.

The fortunes of Porta Coeli (Heaven's Gate) waxed and waned throughout its 600-year evolution to an enclave of exquisite silence, situated between a provincial city and small villages rife with the everyday agitation of post-communist society. The economic structures that supported the abbey have long since collapsed and it serves now, primarily, as a repository of memories. An on-site museum serves up shards of history (semi-precious stones mined from the region's hills and domestic tidbits from the cloister's heyday) while the grounds, church and cloister (as ensemble) tell of a vast enterprise eclipsed by time and pockmarked by endless internecine warfare and strife. The inner cluster of buildings is stabilized while the outer is crumbling. Restoration has saved the historic core while



reality and its vicissitudes has claimed the rest. A huge penumbra encircles this enclave, the aurora of an uncanny a-historical eclipse, but it is strangely set (positioned in present-times) to burst into a dazzling blast of light at some future moment when history ends, or the dialectical games of past past and present past collapse utterly exhausted. Porta Coeli's troubles are a subclass (an epicycle) of the troubles of the greater Czech lands – it has always been a part-national, part-international, part-supranational (plus supernatural) enterprise. On that more sublime level, rotating on a much larger wheel, beyond the tortured, petty cycles of national, political, and economic fratricide, Porta Coeli (as conceptual sign and actually existing thing) is (in many ways) the ultimate shadowland where day and night transact secret pacts for the glory of the “world to come”, here and now.

### III. THE SIGN OF THE SUBLIME

Within the alcoves and shaded reserves of architectural and urban form is an analogous “chemical” (chimeric) *esprit de coeur* to that which animates the archetypal shaded linden grove – i.e., a potential cultural excitation (most commonly shut down as quickly as it arrives). This is the after-half-life of architecture, and its “radio-active” possibility. Architectural isotopes (tropes) are essentially typological and universal (interchangeable). This life passes in the gaps between things (after hours). This is the echo of the cultural staged in the static, transformed spaces of buildings; the inner clash of ideas and concepts hidden within the de-natured, deracinated modern concept of the “aesthetic”. To read and/or hear this clash one must become, alas, an “aesthete” of form. This architectural surplus is the proverbial trace and/or ghost of what is suppressed by most architectures, and by architecture as a built form of hegemony. This architectural thing-not-in-itself represents the registration of nominal, singular things in a much larger index – viz., an index that is quite often stashed below deck, in the cargo hold, in unmarked crates, aboard the onrushing ship of modern architecture. This echo represents, performatively (self-consciously), “other possible histories”. It is less a “haunting” than an “illumination” or lighting up of the dim interior of architecture in search for suppressed signifiers. The idea of the present past is its closest approximation even though the present past is part of the normalizing game to recycle the outmoded and defer the radical undoing of the entire non-edifying structure of the prison-house of architecture. The best historians are, therefore, also poets.



Image (above, right) – Spilberk Castle (Brno, Czech Republic)

The majority of life transpires in shadowlands; this includes transgressions. Yet, to cultivate a life of shadows is not to commit treason, nor to transgress, but to dream, working against the tedium of hegemonic noontide. Evening-tide is the magical transitional time of day when poet, prophet, profiteer, king, serf, proletariat, and president inhabit a level playing field. It is the time of the death of the hegemonic that may be discerned in lengthening shadows. Noontide is clamorous by comparison (even if Giacomo Leopardi, “aesthete of ennui”, claimed it is the hour of absolute stillness). Evening-tide is languorous, dreamy, and visionary. At noon everything stands still, including, according to poets, the Sun. At evening the last rays of the Sun glance off stone and steel and glass, off leaf and bark and long-gazing face to catch the edge of things. Perhaps at no other time is the ever-elusive/allusive thing-in-itself (plus the thing-not-in-itself) revealed and more present (luminous) than in evening; i.e., less atrophied and less specified. If Virgil discovered “evening” (its poetic form), as some say, it was because it is the *inherent* hour, the time when time shines from within and the passage of moments, specks of time, time's dust, drips into the mind (a form of metaphysical honey gathered in the extravagant wilderness of evening). The charged expectation of the hour of evening, that pellucid zone between day and night, is the ultimate passageway to the interior of things. Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958) and Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* (1933) inhabit the same synchronic, literary dream-space. Formalist-structuralist criticism of the 1920s and 1930s and high post-structuralist voyages into indeterminacy and intertextuality in the 1980s are intimately coupled, half-secretly conjoined bedmates; the bed was the 20th century. The offspring could be dazzling.

Formalist strategies actually have an extraordinary, far-fetching effect on built form (as on literary form). Coupled with “contextualized discursive praxis” – that so-called 1980s thing – cultural forms can be revamped, revised, and revived. In terms of shadowlands this constitutes re-writing the half-hidden codes of cultural production, or diving into the subterranean matrix that supports the “above-ground” structure. Certain artists, certain writers (and certain film makers) do this out of necessity. Andrei Tarkovsky, for one, realized he had no choice whatsoever.

Image (right) – The author writing “Moravian Shadows” (Skryje, Czech Republic)

It is perhaps not coincidental that Roman Jakobson (associated with the legendary Prague School of structural linguistics) gave a seminal lecture in Brno (Moravia), “The Dominant” (1935), that signaled the shift from late formalism to high structuralism in the critical-analytical game of literary exegesis.<sup>(4)</sup> The “How is it made?” of Russian formalism morphed quickly into the proto-structuralist, operational query “What does it do?” Jakobson also laid out the coordinates for investigating what might best be termed the critical-poetic tripwire, or the “spring” that is tightly wound within language and animates all discourses (including architectural discourse). It is for this reason that Russian Formalism and Prague School Structuralism (and, later, *post-structuralism*) shared a common concern with *poetic language*. The idea of the dominant resonates within the complex of early formulations that later became the foundation for the post-structuralist and deconstructivist obsession with interrogating form. A type of shadowy, literary intrigue (which includes identifying the implicit underlying structures of signifying and operational systems) can be, arguably, detected in late-structuralist, rationalist, and post-structuralist critiques of architecture and architectural discourses as a type of *double shadowland* within modernity – on the one hand the quest for pure form is built up on massive repressions and sublimations, while on the other hand the supporting apparatus for the modernist juggernaut seeks to undo and de-stabilize the entire horrific operation. The Venice School – Manfredo Tafuri et alia – brought this second agenda *per force* into architecture, and its effects are still felt today in the work of its latter-day adherents, e.g., Massimo Cacciari and, to a degree, Giorgio Agamben. Curiously, what Cacciari and Agamben both strenuously seek to re-situate (re-inscribe), at this late date, is poetic language and the concept (sign) of the *cultural constellation* (a synonym for “shadows”). Indeed, Jakobson and his comrades proved conclusively that a discipline, no matter how prosaic, also engenders a discourse (and, thus, discourse analysis). When analytical and abstract discourses topple over, the investigation and regeneration of the poetic structure of things returns (at times with a vengeance).



Formalisms are at first strenuously focused on the specificity of a discipline – its so-called autonomy. Architectural formalism has often mistakenly been equated, in the same way as literary formalism was mistakenly equated (and defined by its detractors), with a reductive, annihilating spirit. This spirit is the quest for an unmediated, absolute some-thing within everything else (the so-called forces of art). As the formalist agenda moves forward, and is bent to new purposes, semantic content is always re-loaded. The cyclical nature of formalism reveals that it is neither one thing nor another but, instead, part of a complex. It is this complex that prefigures the shadowy, recondite, inner world of things and representational systems. As such, formalism is an exquisite means of re-writing the world. As it is often explained away as excessive abstraction, formalism is also perceived (by its critics) as a giant eraser. This giant erasure can, in turn, be perceived as a means of constructing a void – a shadowless petrie dish. When all is said, done, and undone, shadows once again “cross” the petrie dish.

It is this now-classic, cyclical “return of the repressed” (André Breton’s insight by way of Sigmund Freud) that is dealt a provisional death blow in Bachelard’s concept of dialectical sublimation, versus continual sublimation. Bachelard derives this form of “cultural fire”, in *La psychanalyse du feu* (1938), from a close reading of Novalis.<sup>(5)</sup> It is Bachelard’s privileging of Novalis’ concept of intellectual fire (“The blue flower is also red ...”) that unnerves the reader as a revolutionary some-thing else appears on the horizon of thought. In Novalis’ universe, as in Bachelard’s, rationalism is only to be dispensed with through the development of surreationalism (a poetic rationalism, or poeticized rationalism). This is also what almost-always appears and disappears, here and there, then and now, for reasons specific to the architecture of various forms of hegemony. The letter kills the spirit (over and over) ... It is the surreational component, in human nature and human reason, that can discern, read, process, and situate (insofar as “situate” means to put into play and/or critique) the shadowlands between Pascal’s two infinities (transposed in Kant to “the starry sky above and the moral law within”). Perhaps it is the commingling of these two things, in the human-divine constellation otherwise known as civilization, that produces (has produced, will produce) the most sublime shadowlands of all.

GK (October 2004)

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## ENDNOTES

1 – Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), pp. 59-60.

2 – Boris M. Ejxenbaum, “Literary Environment”, trans. I.R. Titunik, in Ladislav Matejka, Krystyna Pomorska, eds., *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 2002), p. 56.

3 – Gracq is describing a ruined small chapel (the Chapel of the Abyss) encountered by the two male protagonists of his gothic-surrealist tragedy. “It presented the image of marvellous antiquity and in more than one place fragments of the delicate arches had fallen onto the black grass, where they shone like the white and scattered limbs of a hero treacherously felled, to whom the mysterious oratory would consecrate to the end of time the tears of an insatiable sorrow. Crazy vines with curiously lacy leaves, roots with vigorous thorns, and tufts of grey oats clung to the stones. On all sides the forest encircled it like a stifling cloak, and under the thick branches there floated a vague green twilight that had all the immobility of stagnant water: the place seemed so perfectly enclosed that the confined air could no more circulate there than in a long-closed room, and drifting around the walls in an opaque cloud, imbued for centuries with the persistent perfumes of moss and dried stones, it seemed like an odorant balm into which the precious relics had fallen.” Julien Gracq, *Chateau d’Argol* (1938), trans. Louise Varèse (London: Pushkin Press, 1999), pp. 85-86.

4 – “Jakobson here sees the new inquiries into the structural characteristics of verbal art as a third stage of Formalist research as opposed to its earlier stage of semantic emphasis and its still earlier form-oriented beginnings. Thus Formalism gradually underwent the conversion to Structuralism through its growing awareness of the delicate relationship between material manifestation and the complex code of normative rules.” Ladislav Matejka, Krystyna Pomorska, in Matejka, Pomorska, eds., *Readings in Russian Poetics*, p. xxi. “The dominant specifies the work. The specific trait of bound language is obviously its prosodic pattern, its verse [structural] form. It might seem that this is simply a tautology: verse is verse [architecture is architecture]. However, we must constantly bear in mind that the element which specifies a given variety of language [form] dominates the entire structure and thus acts as its mandatory and inalienable constituent dominating all the remaining elements and exerting direct influence upon them.... We may seek a dominant not only in the poetic [architectural] work of an individual artist [architect] and not only in the poetic [architectural] canon, the set of norms of a given school, but also in the art of a given epoch, viewed as a particular whole.” Roman Jakobson, “The Dominant”, trans. Karol Magassy, in *ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

5 – See “The Novalis Complex”, in Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. Alan C.M. Ross (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1968).

# THE NEAR & THE FAR: MORAVIAN GARDEN

## THE GARDEN (C. 1999)

Johannes Kepler's Ellipse and *Carpinus betulus* arbor, two new elements to a South Moravian country garden ...



The serpentine stone walk is merely an alteration to the earlier straight stone walk, but with the addition of alpine plants along the edge. A *Tsuga canadensis* hedge is planned for the lower edge of the terraced garden (the very young plants have been added and will take ten years to close in). The top edge of the stone retaining wall, re-pointed in 1995 and dropping five feet to the grass path along the river, was planted with *Parthenocissus quinquefolia* (the seed gathered from a railroad siding in Brno in 1995). It now cascades the full distance to the ground below. Clematis, Euonymus, and *Hydrangea anomala petiolaris* have been added below the wall to further veil the stone expanse. The southwest corner of the wall is being built up around the well (above the wall) with perennials and woodland shrubs (*Sambucus pubens* and *Corylus avellana*). – UPDATE: The *Tsuga* hedge is now two years old and about twelve inches tall (June 2001).

Image (left) - *Carpinus arbor*, Skryje

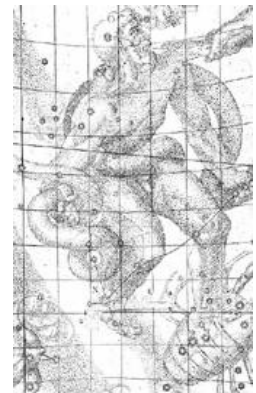
In the upper garden, Kepler's Ellipse is edged with transplanted clumps of wild *Festuca* and wild *Asarum*, tufts of *Armeria alpina*, splotches of *Sedum*, and reddish granite stones from the river. A single *Acer palmatum dessicatum* has been added on a small "mountain" of red stones from the river with white-veined black stones as a "peak". This two-stone palette was used in the re-paving of the town square in nearby Tišnov.

Three *Cupressus leylandii* have been added to the edge of the serpentine walk for scale and to provide a figurative "descent" toward the river from the house. The Hindu Vastushastra has vetted all locations. This Hindu "atom bomb" has also justified the obliteration of *Forsythia* near the house and English Ivy on the barn.

The base of the *Carpinus* arbor has been planted at the four corners with English Ivy and Clematis. The arbor was fabricated out of four three-inch thick *Carpinus* trees cut from a copse above the village and bent into an arch. The side branches were retained to weave into the tracery of the arbor. It will, in time, again be green. The bent *Carpinus* tracery is fixed in place with steel wire and concrete footings. The Ivy will attempt to pull it to the ground. Its height is about ten feet to allow for hanging vines at the top of the arch. Its footprint is irregular, the frame displaced by shifting the second set of uprights to face the garden. The first set is aligned with the corner of the adjacent building. The resultant footprint is a pattern similar to the body of the constellation Orion. – UPDATE: The arbor fell apart ... The four uprights remain (June 2001). Live *Carpinus* will be added when these poles collapse.

Image (right) – Johannes Kepler's "Map of the Heavens" (1606)

Grass has been altered from "running" status to "carpet" status with concise, curving edges. White clover seed has been sprinkled about and dolomitic lime added. The grass carpets will be pampered beyond belief – they will be magic carpets. The grass ellipse is exactly the size required to set up a small tent. Beds have been cut out of the former lawn and "sculpted" to rise above the pristine grass carpets. Local cut grasses (hay), compost, sand (imported) and leaf mould from the coniferous woods has been used to raise the profile of the beds and "seal" them. The cut sod was inverted and buried below the top layers of amendments and mulch. Water is brought from the river by hand. – UPDATE: More grass has been removed and the hour approaches when there will be only two very pristine ovals of green amid the riotous vegetation (June 2001).



The outer face of the old stone terrace wall contains “weeps”, the point where underground terracotta drain tiles from the rainwater collection system daylight. During showers the rainwater runs off the terracotta roof into rain gutters and into the underground pipes. The weeps will be covered with masks in the future. The spouting water will be captured in gardens along the base of the wall. The rain and gray water systems in the garden are to be integrated into a collection and storage continuum for recycling and conservation. Overflow will spill out through the masked weeps. – UPDATE: No masks have been unearthed yet (June 2001).

**Image (below, right) – The “near and far” landscape, Skryje**

Very small boxwood plants are being trained and shaped to stand in for planets in the Kepler Ellipse. Plants all are purchased from local sources or raised from seed. Most are introduced to the garden when very small. The future growth of the larger species will eventually displace surrounding plantings and the garden will evolve from child’s play to serious mischief.

**NOTES & POST-RATIONALIZATIONS:**

Toy snakes and lizards have been placed on sunning stones in the upper garden (Ellipse). – UPDATE: They have vanished (June 2001).

A particular type of crumbling stone (that reminds me of my teeth) has been chosen as occasional accent (it is a type of decomposing quartz or feldspar).



White quartz stones have been added to the mix of edging stones along the serpentine walk to reflect moonlight (to aid night vision).

The quartz stones appear occasionally in the river, washing downstream from the deep gorges upstream.

Flat stones have been stacked loosely in a curving wall along the lower grass carpet marking a bed of cinnamon-scented red roses.

The flat stone wall attracts crickets and the shelves formed by the layers are a basking place and terrace for the same.

The walls are watered (irrigated) by hand to benefit the crickets.

CD-ROM disks have been suspended from the fruit trees and currant bushes with light fishing mono-filament to warn off birds. – UPDATE: They have been discontinued by the keeper (June 2001).

Turning in the breezes they resemble the moon and wandering stars (planets).

There are plans to break open the wall of one of the buildings for use as a *sala terrena*. – UPDATE: This has been done and built-in furniture fashioned from ancient planks of Sycamore have been installed (June 2001).

At 7 p.m. long shadows cross the garden as the sun sets behind the western hills. – UPDATE: See the sister essay “Moravian Shadows” (January 2006) ...

Smoke from evening fires swirls around the river basin invading the garden with its acrid perfume and its sensuous gauze (see image above for traces of this ambient element).

Swallows perform aerial acrobatics mimicking the over flights of the Czech Army fighters. – The Czechs are still flying Soviet-era MIGs but have recently tendered requests for modern “Western” jets.



An evening procession of ducks from the neighboring farm signals nightfall.

The slender profile of the upright duck has been secretly incorporated into the plan of the garden.

## DISCURSUS I (2002)

*Depth Charges* – An evolutionary approach to restoring depth will work just fine. Cannibalizing both the truly historic and the simply overrated fake historic aspects is possible through a method of appropriation versus demolition. Grafting depth onto the insipid requires that the best be salvaged and incorporated and the worst be simply savaged. *Land* is what matters. Position and juxtaposition reign supreme. The translation of one form to another, in an incremental manner, will reveal the potential (repressed) linguistic dust present in the most pathetic examples of building. This “dust” is a fertile duplicity that will allow great latitude for true cultural renovation.

### Image (right) – Spilberk Castle, Brno

*The Case of the Insignificant* – A small Moravian garden. To the east, hills (and the rising sun); to the south, hills; to the north, hills; to the west, hills (and the setting sun). It is very small and very insignificant.

Within its tiny borders, formed by stone walls – walls surmounted by fences and the walls of the country house – is a series of plots, traces of the former the farmyard.

These plots have an explicit rectilinear nature and are the remains of utility. To transform them, now, in the 21st century, to an aesthetic and purely intangible significance (a tangible insignificance) is to purposely violate the orthogonal and utilitarian. This also implies the addition of semantic depth – a dimension of pure “writing” against the formal and functional history of the site.



The first act was re-pointing the exterior of the south-facing retaining wall, above the river/stream and below the garden. The next, ongoing, is to obscure that very geometric structure, that is the “mineralogical” – or stone on stone. The ever-tempting signature conifers were moved or removed early on from within the garden. The stone walkways were dug out and realigned (unaligned/maligned). The straight lines were inflected, or warped or lost within new vegetation. The edges became volumes and the layers (terraces) were altered *without* relation to the formal four-square plan. An ellipse replaced a large blue spruce and its green (lawn) became a new center (mini solar system). The green ellipse is wrapped with plants (planets), and ever-changing in seasonal qualities. The center is the place where the sun makes its most vivid presence known in the garden. The dimension is calculated to accommodate the outstretched human body (the sun-bathing human body), or a table and a few chairs. At this center, in centripetal fashion, the lower terraces unfurl from the forces set in play by this green void.

A second ellipse is under way, a few steps below and to the west, a subsidiary system. It borders the vestigial vegetable plot and is violated by a currant bush and a plum tree, both hangers-on from the previous regime. This western ellipse is also a patch of grass edged by a new, curving stone sitting-wall and plants, including a somewhat ancient and mature lilac at the northwest edge. To leave the higher ellipse and pass to the lower, one must engage the rainwater cistern, with its awkward open cubic form protruding from the ground. Above it rises a towering Thuja (cedar) – positive and negative volumes representing both the presence and absence of the outmoded garden. The cistern is empty (because it leaks). The Thuja is slated to be cut by half (because it is out of scale). This juncture is the messy collision of the former state and its successor – the crashing together of two systems.

The lower garden (of which the second ellipse is part) will be expanded (by its extension into the lowest portion of the garden below the plum tree) and defined by a shift in grades (wide grass steps will lead out to the “Strand” – the strip of garden just above the stone retaining wall and below the first ellipse). *Tsuga canadensis* (hemlock) have been introduced (very young plants) to grow up at this edge and close in (as an evergreen perimeter). The Strand will become a sand or gravel swathe (it is now grass). It too will have an irregular “wave” edge condition and be framed by vegetation. Within it, the view will “close” (sitting), and “open” (standing). From the first ellipse the view will be over the Strand to the far bank of the river, the lindens, and the south hills. The multiple “horizons” build from within the garden to the penultimate “horizon”, the curving green mass of the hills against the sky. These



horizons *are not lines*.

The most ridiculous and sublime measures are required to alter the views of the garden *from the outside*. The stone walls and the house volume are excessively orthogonal from the exterior approaches. Below the wall, a cataclysm of plants is required to stage the illusion of thickness and vagueness (distance). To block these last vestiges of the skeletal past will require fulsome, corporeal excess of planting – thick, uneven, woolly, wild, extravagant gestures of colonization and conquest. The heavy structure of the architecture must vanish beneath the luxuriant, generative contingency of massed, polyvalent, polyglot, polymorphous green. This ambient edge and new amorphous volumetric condition will ensure that the last traces of precision and intrepid rigor vanish (to the eye and soul) and merge with the effervescent froth of the animated universe of garden and not garden. Here the real nature of shade and light will mix and confound the lasting imprint of utility and its cousin, banality. The great cycle of the seasons and the revolution of the heavens seek, too, respite in the idleness of green shadows.

Image (below, left) – Moravian landscape, Skryje



There are numerous types of order that disturb the soul – one alone will suffice. The stringent, often puritanical inroads of utility and function are prime agents of inner tedium. To loose the proto-generative is to enhance the seductive veil thrown over such measures by nature and by artifice, those gestures that loosen the bonds that hold in thrall the vivid undercurrents of the world and its secret vivaciousness. Shadows are generative – the nurseries of imagination. As sub genius loci effects, shadows, the play of light and darkness, are the eternal return of a spirit that animates life, time, and desire. Yes, Winter *and* Spring, Summer *and* Autumn. But most of all, Spring and Autumn are idyllic, signature times for gardens and for architecture (for garden architecture). The stillness of Winter and the cacophony of Summer are balanced in the twin,

generative gestures of the year's morning and evening.

## DISCURSUS II (2004)

I took the soil the moles offered, below the new stone steps and low wall, and spread it over the cut (salvaged), newly installed sod at the top of the wall/steps, dusting it with sand, spreading a thin layer of quick-lime, and grass seed ... Thor rolled in, rumbling, and the short outburst lasted just long enough to wash the seed into place amid the blades of grass and trefoil leaves of white clover ... “I heard, at the bottom of the garden, the last peals of thunder growling among the lilacs ...” ...

Twenty-four hours after Thor passed through the stream turned brown from silt washed down from (presumably) the uplands where trees are cut on the steep slopes of the valley (somewhat indiscriminately these days) ... I noted a small bird carrying a single strand of hair in its beak ... The swallows were dancing in the evening sky ... The rockery has expanded, and the fading clumps of *Armeria maritima* were moved to this new portion of the garden from the Kepler Ellipse (where they were languishing beneath the lush foliage of herbaceous perennials) ...

*Armeria*, echoes of Iona (*pour mon moi*) ... The Western Isles (of Scotland) ... fragments of an Archie Fisher song go round in my head, “I came to a western island; / As far as a man can walk is my land. / I cleared ten acres and a house I built / Into the side of the hill.” ... “The roof leaks, the windows rattle, / And the grass in the high ground won’t feed cattle; / The west wind blowin’ off the sea / Makes it hard to grow a tree ...” ... “Some nights, when the bright lights flicker, / I sail to the mainland for my liquor. / Haven’t got a woman to call my own, / But I never wake up alone ...” ... “A man needs to feel the ground / And the wind to tell him that the world spins ‘round; / To watch the stars and taste the sea, / And a woman to keep him free ...” ... (Eildon Music, 1976) ...

Strange gnats hover in the air ... Flies swirl, spiraling in midair, aloft on miniature thermals ... Yet a fly is not an eagle nor hawk ... In the garden, early blooms ... *Magnolia*, *Primula*, *Myosotis*, *Bergenia* (just passed), *Aquilegia*, Pheasant’s-Eye *Narcissus* (Poet’s *Narcissus*), *Doronicum*, *Clematis alpina* (starting its seasonal climb toward the stars) ... Newly planted *Nepeta*, Lilacs, Peonies (in bud), splashes of color in freshly planted pots (here and there) ... *Helleborus* (hanging on, not yet ideally situated) ... Lascivious green fronds of ferns (delicate, upright ... others with inward-turned tips, waiting awhile longer to reach outwards, switching from vertical to horizontal deployment) ... A few days later, frost nips the tips of the ferns ... Cold nights and sometimes sleet in the early morning ...

Cinnamon-streaked crosiers, Pulmonaria (lungwort), Dicentra ... Ribes (currant bushes, standard form, single-stemmed) crowded into the corner of the shrinking vegetable plot at the far north-western edge of the garden ... First flush of Iberis ...

**Image (right) – Author’s morning shadow, “Kepler’s Ellipse”, Skryje**

Skryje is a village with perhaps twenty to thirty small houses, many summer houses (dachas) ... Because it is in a valley, the road more or less ends here, with impassable passes through the wooded hills of north-west Moravia ...

The country house is almost a compound, with additions over time spread over the perhaps one-half hectare site ... In the front portion, along the road, an enterprising soul has rented one small room for an impromptu weekend pub ... for 1000 KC per year (about \$40 US) ... It operates off the map (radar), for the most part, as does the village itself ...



S and I go for evening beer (Černá Hora, Black Mountain) ... 11 KC for a large glass ... Everyone else is working on a tab ... The blue cash-box is mostly idle, whereas the notebook full of tallies (strokes) is annotated every few minutes ... A car arrives with new half kegs ... and two bags of chips (which are passed around, gratis ...) ...

Ten to twelve locals are downing beer after beer, a small stove ticking away, burning pine, warming the room ... A pair of shoes, an umbrella, a picture of Václav Havel and Gustáv Husák (Havel’s enemy, his *bête noire*) adorn the four walls ... They silently ignore one another ... Three dogs wander about or nap on chairs ... A black poodle, a white spaniel, and a mongrel dachshund (brown with a striking white diamond on the back of its elongated neck) ...

It’s all Czech, this evening ... I don’t understand much at all ... I do detect a furious debate about the US as the new Russia (viz., Soviet Union) ... a new imperial cancer and/or pox ... The former fearless Czech communist leader Husák is frowning ... Havel is smiling ... They stare past one another, gazes crossing in mid-air, overseeing, refereeing this debate ... Their pictures bracket the non-sense of the current neo-imperial nightmares, here and not-here (in one form or another ...) ...

The woman with the black fingernails and orange hair is passing beer after beer down the table while wildly carrying the debate ... To her left is a barrel-chested man with wisps of hair tucked beneath his cloth, visor-less cap ... His pale-blue trousers are patched with a dark-blue cloth ... threadbare ... Another man, sitting next to the cat-napping dachshund, gazes blankly off into space, occasionally returning to make a point ... A three-light chandelier-type light fixture with two lights (bulbs) illuminates a scene straight out of a Daumier print ... This pub, always-already below the salt, somehow measures time (and life/humanity) for this handful of quibbling souls ...

Sad-eyed, 35-year-old M (her Slovak husband in jail for some sort of blue-collar, economic crime) reaches over the makeshift bar to draw beer from the tap ... In-between fetching beers she devours an entire bag of chips ... The saliva from the white spaniel has dried just above my knee on my recently hand-washed black jeans ... The brown dachshund (with the white diamond on the back of its neck), curled up on the chair next to the man staring off into space, holds one ear aloft, cocked (the other flopped downwards), listening ... Occasionally s/he opens one eye to measure the crowd (to see if his/her master/mistress has left, perhaps ... who knows ...) ...

A frost is expected tonight ... the stars appear far-away and dim ... The air, chilled, is damp and sweet with wood-smoke ... Night, and its very own “velvet revolution”, has fallen ...

The ailing, ancient lilacs ... Syringa vulgaris (Common Lilac) ... They are late this year and the old stems are covered with peeling bark and lichen ... I pruned away the dead wood, climbing into the multi-stemmed base, poised, snipping and sawing ... I set aside the cuttings for a lilac fire ... With a wire brush, I scrubbed away the old bark and lichen revealing a tawny, golden under-hue ... They lean out over the second grass ellipse/oval, newly trimmed, over a low stone sitting wall constructed a few years ago ... I mixed wood ash and nettle water in a bucket with more water and brushed this slurry onto the stems from the base to the newer, somewhat greener wood in the crown ... These lilacs are in some way S’s mother’s double ... They have been here since the beginning ... She is fond of them and worries about them as she worries about her own failing health ... Her ailments and those of the

lilac tree are the same ... Time has taken its toll ... Perhaps she could sense the treatment – the “manicure”, the exfoliation (scrubbing), and ash-mud application (masque) – miles away in Brno ...

H. brought a large tome on Jan Blažej Santini Aichel’s bizarre, sacred 18th-century, high-Baroque architecture, published (lavishly) by Charles University (Praha) in 1998, text in Czech ... Santini’s output was prodigious; a wild form of Czech high-Baroque syntheses based on Italian-Baroque influences (including innumerable outrageous buildings constructed by Italian architects working in the Habsburg Czech Lands for the Church after the brutally squelched insurrections of the Protestant nobility) ... An architectural influenza, then ... The pictures are not in “Czech”, but an odd, ideal (universal) language of forms ... Baroque-Gothic forms ... spatial and decorative (the decorative quite often feigning authenticity ... painterly effects ... painted plaster made to look like marble or stone ... Angels perched/roosting about the typically billowing spaces of baroque interiors) ... “Italianate” excursions, constructed on the run, in haste, in a period of perhaps fifty to seventy years, many after-Santini (after his death), and only “based” on his plans ... Yet rooted in the northern soil of the nominally “Catholic” Czech Lands ... Between 1700 and 1750, for the most part, dozens of churches, chapels, and monastic compounds went up, Santini turning out plans from the sacred lathe of his imagination, a production (mostly in brick) much denigrated, later, by the arch-ideologues of Modernism proper (the enemies of “historicism”) ... His workshop no doubt was aligned with the obscure sources of pure ideality buried within the Counter-Reformation assault (well after the Thirty Years War), when built propaganda was produced en masse like the annual crops of wheat and barley ... Fervid, fermented geometries after Borromini and Brandl ... Interiors after Bernini (literally), in Praha and northwest Moravia (in particular), Zďar somehow the epicenter of the most abstruse, fabulous (troubling) works ...

The botched pruning of the plum tree was resolved by sawing off all the stumps near-flush with the trunk (leaving a small nub to allow the wound to “heal”, produce – in time – “closure” ...) ... This state of things came about when two Hornbeam (*Carpinus*) trees were added to each side of the old tree, as understudies, in preparation for eventual removal of the senescent plum ...

Venturing further into the canopy, I sawed away at extraneous branches of the plum, those competing with one another (overlapping), and any dead wood and/or shoots rising vertically from within the inner part of the crown ... The wind was gusting and I rode out the swaying tree from within the forked upper reaches of the pliant tree ...



Eyes from passersby and inquisitive townspeople followed these antics ... The ladder reached only so far, to the first tier of mature branches leaving the column of the trunk, and I stepped into the architecture of the canopy, testing each limb in advance, leaving behind the solid (immoveable) structure of the ladder and lower tree for the upper, mobile (waving) infrastructure of the perhaps thirty-foot tall plum ... I removed all competing branches, save one (which would have left a huge hole in the canopy), throwing the cut branches (afterwards) over the garden wall onto the tops of the chicken-wire-covered compost frames, collecting small twigs and branches in a basket for a small fire, adding them to the lilac cuttings for a future “ceremonial” fire by the streamside (always at twilight ... even-ing) ...

**Image (left) – *Doronicum* “guarding” the rear gate to the garden, Skryje**

Notes from the Tišnov nursery ... *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* “White Spot” ... *Buxus sempervirens* (558 KC to 748 KC ... KC = Czech koruna ... \$1 US = 25 KC) ... *Buddleia weyeriana*, *B. davidii*, *B. alternifolia* ... *Euonymus europaeus* (“Spindle-tree” ... the same one we see often growing in the thickets, spread by seed by birds ... 198 KC) ... *Hydrangea anomala* “*Cordifolia*” (the same as *H. anomala petiolaris*?) ... Confirming plants already planted ... and sizing up alternatives ... Which *Buddleia* did S plant? ... The little *Buxus* s. plants we put in years ago are now worth (at retail) \$20 to \$30 US ... Looking for Azaleas to grow in pots ... *Rhododendron* “Persil” (white ... 568 KC), R. “Kermesiana” (pink ... 218 KC), R. “Geisha Orange” (85 KC) ... perhaps ...

Time out, Brno ... Went to see the Josef Čapek exhibition, “Josef Čapek: The Humblest Art” (works from 1914-1924), at Moravské galerie ... “Modern artistic sentiment delights in expressing itself in the most comprehensive



manner through the maximum economy.” (JC, 1924) ... Karel’s brother ... It was Josef who coined, for Karel, the word *robot* ... Here are Josef’s expressive, eclectic paintings from the 1910s and early 1920s ... Heads, torsos, half-length figures of women c. 1914 greet you as you enter the first gallery (watercolor on paper, plus ink and collage, ink and charcoal variations) ... Enigmatic expressions ... one eye, an ‘x’ for a mouth, sidewise sweep of hair (“Head of a Young Woman with Ribbon”, 1914) ... “Meditative calm”, and lyrical half-abstractions ... “Fractions of an almost agonizing sharpness emerged.... Soothing womanly line, man’s dark torso and a wholly imperceptible face.... Just before they vanished from sight, the images sharpened with an air of tranquility and empathy, as if a flow of water stopped ...” (JC, “Manuscript Found on the Street”, 1915) ... “Geometric signs: and fragment[s] of reality introduced through a concrete detail [vestige] ...” (Wall text, with interpellations, “Assembling the Figure”) ... “La Toilette” (series, c. 1916-1917, linocut on paper), recurring (wan/thin) smile, angular elbows, jutting breasts, tilted head, “high” stylized banalities (lyrical reductions) ... all of these works are small, intimate anti-portraits ... “Street Walker” (oil on canvas, perhaps 24” x 24”, 1918), blue-violet aura, diagonal bird-like prostitute/silhouette, black forms against the vague illumination of a streetlamp/orb ... “Angles, light and letters” *après* Picasso and Léger (*legerdemain*) ... and Braque ... animistic rites folded into urban *bric-à-brac* ... “Disclaimed versions” c. 1918, or small paintings torn into six pieces and reassembled here and now ... jig-saw puzzles ... “Primitivism and magic realism” (Wall text) ... Čapek’s *The Humblest Art* (Aventinum, 1920) returns “to harmony and idyll”, or “melancholy that springs from an unfulfilled longing for a lost paradise” (Wall text) ... à la Henri Rousseau ... “sanctity of everyday life” ... or “glancing at a Singer sewing machine” which “falsifies nothing in this world” ... Tired, then, of the phantasmatic and sinister world of late-Expressionism (lingering on in/through Cubism) ... Moravské galerie v Brně, 03/26/04 through 05/23/04 ...



Watering ... I make singular, repeated trips to the river with watering can in hand to bring the greenish-brown water up the fifty feet or so to the garden ... up one set of stairs, remembering to duck, to not bang my head on the low limb of the prune tree guarding the entrance to the garden from below ... Perhaps if I was putting out a fire I would carry two buckets at once, and hasten less slowly ... Each bucket is delivered to the beds in a coarse fountain /spray of drops and streams through the metal rose at the end of the watering can’s sleek, galvanized steel neck/spout ... It is, then, an aesthetic thing not to be maximized (nor underestimated), nor Taylorized (though during droughts it is less likely to please in quite the same nonchalant manner ...) ... As the artificial rain-shower travels over the terrain of the beds, washing away bits of mulch and sand, settling things, the last drops are deliberately (carefully) allowed to fall, slowly, in their minute particularity, upon a sprig of violet, a single rosette of sedum hiding between two stones, a clod of dirt, a crease of stone, a whorl of fern ... till the can is spent ... totally, and completely ...

Image (left) – The re-pointed garden retaining wall (with terracotta “weep”), Skryje

A sinuous, curving line derived from the upright body of the wayfaring “cosmic” ducks (which wander up and down the stream each evening), previously installed in the early ground plan of the garden (but later obscured by subsequent work), has returned, today, in the form of a freshly cut edge in the lowest terrace (above the lower garden wall), tracing (yet departing as well) the curvature of the stacked small, flat-stone edge that marks the lower, second-to-last bed ... Below this new line (drawn with spade and sand), a last strip of grass/lawn (swirling) leads toward the new rockery ... Below this last strip of grass, the Hemlock (*Tsuga*) bed (young trees spaced one-spade length apart, one day to “close”, forming a low, loose hedge) ... Beyond that, the Woodbine (grown from seed purloined in a waste-place in Brno years ago) trails/spills over the wall, dropping/ falling half of the five feet or so to the compost frames below, outside the garden itself ...

“Walk the mystery of the curve ...” ... As with the care of soil, one does not water plants, per se, but beds (and rock edges and steps ...) ... the garden milieu (milieux), its *mise en scène* is what is most supportive (important) within this theater of affects (never effects, nor causes and effects) ... As the secret “total work of art”, a garden is a multiplicity of “folded” and nominal effects (superabundant, saturated – hopefully – as an affective milieu ...) ... The fertility of the soil is mirrored overhead, at night, within the starry vault, with/by analogues that suggest intense

carinality within all things ... luminosity ... and most of all, within imagination (the “soil” from which a garden lives) ... I detect in Dante’s placing Beatrice’s eyes in the starry heavens/vault a neo-Platonic some-thing else, no doubt by way of medieval Arabic sources (streams/“electrical” so-called cultural currents) ... The sky mirrors things-not-in-themselves, or – depending on your point of view/bias – everything and/or nothing (at all) ... mirroring your worldview ... or vice versa (to Stendhal’s “happy few”) ... Said Coleridge to Southey ...

We went to the new super-supermarket, Globus, and paid the 15 KC for a cart in the US-style vacuous parking lot ... To enter the aisles you have to make a hard right just inside the automatic doors and pass through acres of plastic house-wares, plastic clothes, tires, coolers, appliances, etcetera ... Nonetheless, when examining eggs, some of them still had feathers on them (plus that now common-place red date-stamp ...) ...

“The mountain rose before me / from a deep well of desire / And the fountain of forgiveness / beyond the ice and the fire ...” ... Sometimes Skryje is like a prison-house, other times a make-shift monastery (perhaps charterhouse ...) ... Other-times ... Sometimes it seems like a rustic version of a bankrupted (poor) Renaissance villa, situated in the hills, facing down time itself, a therapeutic distance from everything else but itself ... And not unlike “Back to Ireland”, that small stretch of cobble-beach on Iona where reputedly Columba sat, “back” (turned to) Ireland (from whence he came ... in self-imposed exile ...), here one sits “back” to Praha or “back” to Brno (yet never “back” to New York ... because one always needs a way out ...) ... *Et in Arcadia ego* (so “they” say, and write ... and argue over ...) ... All things post-Romantic then ... and why not? ... inclusive of, of course, gardens (“places of best-kept secrets ...”) ...

In the morning, three cups of coffee (Turkish style) and three cigarettes (Sparta, red pack), back-to-back, one after another ... Some bread with butter, two eggs (soft-boiled) with salt and pepper ... The spring water is always cold, the well water always dirty (contaminated with silt), the rain almost always falls in-between bursts of brilliant daylight, yet sometimes at night ... The dogs next door, across the stream, always bark in the late afternoon, the rooster and his three or four hens always wanders to and fro, along the embankment of the stream, below the garden, the clouds almost always race past, up the valley (west-southwest) ... The forest is still, flanking the hills ... Silent pines crown the upper reaches, opening to high fields ...



Image (above, right) – Street and hills, Skryje

No one knows where S’s mom disposes of the spoils of the outhouse since she was admonished for putting it in the compost ... It is a rich, dark secret ... Perhaps she does away with this surplus matter under cover of darkness (night soil at nightfall) or at 5 a.m. in the morning ... Wherever it goes, now, its end is known only to her (and any other eyes open at the appointed hour) ... No one asks ... The grass grows greener somewhere ... and hopefully the algae bloom in the river is not related to this aporia (non-crescent hole in things) ...

Two days ago we visited a church completed in 1771, based on plans by Santini (1671-1727) ... Not “pure” Santini, this high-Baroque pile struck the eye immediately, with forcefulness, as H’s van descended the bend in the road, entering into the small village of Křtiny ... St. Mary’s (1771), built atop the former site of an indulgence-selling parish in the Middle Ages ... that is, site of a former Gothic church sacked by the Hussites in 1424 ... Not far away (up the road, around the bend, and atop a hill) a small shrine tucked below linden trees, apparent site of an apparition of the Virgin c. 1210 ... The statue of the Virgin in the church at Křtiny is said to have vanished from time to time, back then, only to turn up at this “preferred” location, only to be hauled back to the parish HQ below ... Baroque angels are said to have turned their backs on the sanctuary of the Gothic church when the priests ignored the Virgin’s wishes to build instead at the site of her visitations ... In Santini’s church, the same high-Baroque angels (high above the sanctuary) gesture heavenwards ... Frescos rise above this, above all, by Jan Jiří Etgens (1643-1754), a painted illusion for/of transcendence (transcendental airs ... then ...) ... Baroque atmospherics and set pieces ... A dove, with outstretched wings, plies (sails across) the space of implied-apotheosis, the zenith, where the plum-colored clouds and amassed saints vanish/melt into thin air (vaporized), into a pale-golden aureole of light (not-light ... but lumen ... light illuminated from within ...) ... Jan Blažej Santini Aichel, Praha-based architect, son



of stone-cutters, one leg possibly shorter than the other (like Byron) ... “Star” Santini attractions at Žďár nad Sázavou (in north-west Moravia) include the Dolní (Lower) Hřbitov (Cemetery) attached to the Church of Jan Nepomucký (1719-1722) ...

Driving along the valley, south, back toward Brno, we stopped at the entrance to a series of now-secured underground caverns/passages that continue up the valley for miles upon miles, carved out of rock by an underground river, and site of an inexplicable Iron-Age (Bronze-Age?) mystery (discovered/unearthed in the late 19th century by a German archaeologist) ... That is, a chieftain buried in a carriage, with his entire entourage ... ritual slaughter ... Buried with grain, relics, weapons, and an eerie, totemic bull (with gemstone eyes) ... The air escaping from the gated entrance to the caverns is bone-chilling cold ... *Time exhales* ... The river here vanishes each year, goes below, carving its way through the ancient substrate of Moravia ... The valley is littered with medieval light-industrial ruins ... smelting, stone-cutting, mining ... St. Mary's at Křtiny marks time in its own way, an eschatological (or is it teleological) full-stop disclosed somewhere in the vague, atmospheric vaults overhead ... the vaults below filled with painted skulls ... skulls wearing simulated green garlands ... a hypothetical outside-time (and a very real *inside-time*) ... A crown set upon an era (era upon era, following eras ... until time stops, again, in its tracks ... inhales ...) ... The dream to start again (over again), in unknown-time ... some other-time ...

GK (January 2006)

Image (below) – “Kneeling tree”, Skryje

